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CASTE IN INDIA



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CASTE IN INDIA

THE FACTS AND THE SYSTEM

BY

ÉMILE SENART

TRANSLATED BY

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

IN making the present translation, for which I assume full responsibility, I have received much help from Miss Ivy Clegg and Miss Elizabeth Symes, and this I am anxious to acknowledge. Much of the arduous spadework has been done by these ladies, but such are the difficulties to be met with in almost every page of this work, due to M. Senart's peculiarities of style and his close reasoning, that in a great number of cases the literal rendering had often to be discarded in favour of a paraphrase. I only trust that in the process of attempting to make this important work intelligible to the English reader no single point made by its learned author has been missed.

I have also to acknowledge further help from Dr. L. D. Barnett of the British Museum and Professor R. L. Turner of the School of Oriental Studies, who have kindly gone through this translation in proof and made valuable suggestions. Being no Sanskritist myself, I felt it only right to invite the aid of these well-known scholars.

That I should have undertaken this task at all

is due mainly to my desire to pay a tribute to a very great French scholar and a valued friend of long standing. If further justification be needed I would claim that fourteen years' residence in Bengal has at least given me some first-hand acquaintance with the workings of the caste system in general.

It was during the first year of my sojourn in India that I became acquainted with M. Senart's famous essay, thanks to the late Sir Herbert Risley, so often referred to in its pages, who held it in the highest esteem.

E. DENISON ROSS

November 1929

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS essay is more than thirty years old : a great age for so modest an investigation. It appeared at an auspicious moment : for a general census of India had just made available vast stores of information, and had prompted a number of those high officials who had contributed to that work to study closely the social organization of India. Many new theories were thus propounded. At that time, also, new district *Gazetteers*, throwing much light on local conditions, were constantly appearing. Time will no doubt show that the end of the last century was the ideal moment in which to take stock of the social life of India in its traditional aspect. For at this period was to be seen the full development of British rule and administration unaffected by the nationalist evolution which was destined to change the outward face of the country.

Although the bibliography of the subject has grown considerably since that time, I do not think anything fresh has been revealed. Nothing in recent publications appears to me of a nature to cause me to modify the conclusions indicated by the older documentation.

Observing how uncertain and vague were current ideas, I intended above all to set forth the character of the caste system as displayed in the only country where it appears to have shaped the whole framework of society, with more precision and authenticity than it had hitherto received.

As regards the past, we must necessarily draw our information from literary tradition. We must, however, proceed with caution; for, as might be expected, it is strongly coloured by the mentality peculiar to India, and is dominated by the ideas and outlook of the Brahmanic class, whose schools elaborated it. This tradition is less concerned with the faithful record of facts than with their arrangement in systems conforming to the tendencies of a strongly biased group. It confuses, for example, class and caste—*varṇa* and *jāti*—and presents as the effect of an intangible dogma what is in reality due to spontaneous and infinitely complex developments. In this way it has tended to distort ideas relating to caste even amongst the most learned. The time has obviously arrived for applying to literary tradition the correctives to be found in the special conditions which governed its formation.

In the hope that this little work still fulfils its original purpose I have readily given my consent to a new impression.

É. SENART

PREFACE

THIS is merely a sketch ; I shall not burden it with a long preface.

In writing so short a study on a subject that is so vast and has given birth to so many weighty tomes, my special aim has been to discover in what light the religious and literary tradition of India appears where caste is concerned.

It will be readily understood how much such an inquiry excites my curiosity as an Indianist, more especially if it is true, as I believe, that in the outward manifestation of this tradition are to be found all the essential characteristics of caste. The elucidation of these characteristics is of the utmost importance for the proper understanding of India's past.

I know how dangerous it is to discuss purely general ideas when dealing with particular facts : to do so is too ambitious in one who aims at strictly accurate conclusions ; and too vague if we wish to keep strictly within the bounds of our imperfect knowledge. We lay ourselves open to the criticism both of those fortunate persons who are ready to accept, unquestioning, ready-made formulae, and of the hasty judge who will accept

nothing short of an absolute decision. Obviously, it is well to proceed with caution.

I was therefore resolved not to reprint this study without strengthening it by some brief observations on other aspects of the religious life of India, by which I hoped to produce a stronger array of convincing proofs. I have been obliged to postpone this project. In reprinting this fragment, which is of necessity somewhat isolated, I have not felt justified in discussing in full detail the picture as it presents itself to me.

The Vedic hymns are composed in a language very much older than that of all the other books ; the sacerdotal literature, ancient Brāhmaṇas and Upanishads, is in its grammar, vocabulary, and style intermediate between the idiom of the hymns and the language of epic poetry, which in its turn is differentiated by slight shades of archaism from the classic Sanskrit of the Śāstras and of the Purāṇas. So much is undisputed ; and this literary chronology remains an indispensable basis for research. But does it warrant all the conclusions that have been deduced from it ?

Vedism in its twofold expression, hymns and sacerdotal literature, Buddhism and Hinduism, are taken as strictly successive evolutions, the one begetting, or at least determining, the other. Vedism is interpreted as the complete exponent

of religious life in ancient times ; Brahmanic Hinduism as the legitimate descendant of purely Vedic elements, originating, perhaps, in a reaction against Buddhism, which was probably itself nothing more than the reaction of personal initiative against the dominant Vedism. Such is the formula which, although it has by implication often been shaken, and even at times contradicted, is still generally accepted. But I fear that it gravely distorts the perspective of the past.

Long ago I proved to my own satisfaction, by means of evidence all the more precious because dates are so rare, namely by a close analysis of the essential features of the Buddha legend, not, as I have too often been made to say, that the Buddha never existed, or that he was no more than a solar or meteorological myth, a doublet of Indra or Apollo, but that an epic legend had very early crystallized around his name. I pointed out also that this legend, which had not been created for him, but which he had inherited, was, whatever interpretation may be put upon it, mystical in its nature ; that it was only transferred to him because it had formerly been associated with ancient gods or heroes, and contained certain features which could be easily applied to a new titular of human and historic origin, transfigured by the pious zeal of his followers. It follows that the divine types of

Hinduism and several of its essential ideas necessarily must date back much farther than people seemed disposed to admit when my book appeared, and that the origins of Hinduism were more remote and more independent than was generally supposed. This theory has since gained ground, and I cannot help congratulating myself on having been among the first to give it shape and thus to make it known to thinking people. It finds, I think, fresh confirmation in the study of the caste system.

Let us now consider what is, briefly, the prevailing theory, even among the best informed, of its origin. There is no allusion to caste in the Vedic hymns; it did not exist therefore at the period when these were composed. Its beginnings are shown in the literature of the Brāhmaṇas. Next in order, the epic legend, with its traces of a dim past, furnishes contemporary evidence of those successive modifications whereby the conditions prescribed by the law-books appear as the outgrowth of the four primitive castes. It is by subsequent transformations, by the relaxation of the ancient rules, that the gulf which yawns between the evidence of books and the present aspect of the system is explained. I, for my part, arrive at singularly different conclusions.

If I see aright, the castes have never existed

exactly as they are presented to us in the Dharmaśāstras, any more in recent times than in the period to which the hymns belong. On the other hand, there is no indubitable proof that they may not have existed from Vedic times, although no doubt in a less advanced stage of development. It is, on the contrary, a supposition which commands acceptance, if it be true that all the seeds from which the caste system has sprung amidst conditions and surroundings peculiar to India are traceable to the common patrimony of the Indo-European races. Between the periods of the hymns and the law-books the castes were able to take more definite shape, and to develop logically in accordance with certain generating principles ; they were not made artificially.

The new feature which appears between the two periods is the perfecting of the Brahmanic system, which, up to the present time, dominates in theory the whole edifice of Hinduism.

The Brahmans base their attitude not only on existing conditions—since in their own way they observe the division of the population into numberless sections separated by the laws of custom—but also on Vedic tradition, which, in this as in other matters, they reverently regard as the root of all things. But for all that they take equal liberties with both these authorities : to matters of popular practice they superadd arbitrary rules and

fantastic restrictions ; they take familiar passages from the Vedas and put them in a new setting. In both directions we detect an artificial theorizing.

Passing now from the hymns to sacerdotal prose, we find that the Brāhmaṇas and the writings around them reflect a situation *de facto* very similar to that which emerges in the Smṛiti. These are able by the use of certain terms to approximate a little more nearly to the usage of the hymns ; they manifestly assume, as far as the castes are concerned, the Brahmanic system and the terminology which it has established. That they contain implicit allusions rather than explicit statements is sufficiently explained by their nature and object, for they are derived from the esoteric literature of the Brahmans. This system, on the contrary, in the epic and the Dharmaśāstras, is addressed to the whole Brahmanized population ; they are books intended for general use. From this point of view, at any rate, there is nothing to prevent our regarding the two series as contemporaneous, although meant for a different audience.

A survey of the social organization reveals, below the Vedic layer, another stratification on which, thanks to the domination of the Brahmanic class,^f there has been superimposed that doctrine which is at once the instrument and the symbol of its power.

Many elements are found blended in this stratum, whose very existence in remote antiquity is concealed from us by Vedic tradition. So far as caste is concerned, the aboriginal population played its part, and continues to do so almost under our eyes ; but its action appears to us a mechanical and passive one, rather than an active or guiding one. To judge by what we ourselves can observe it would be imprudent to regard it as a very decisive and fertile factor in the general domain of religion.

What has happened in the ordinance of the castes is no more than a fragment of the work which has reshaped the whole fabric of religious life. And here everything depends, not on the date of books, but on the significance of their evidence and on the positive value of the elements which they embody.

Let me quote an example in order to make my meaning clear :

The doctrine of metempsychosis is the cornerstone of Hinduism, but it is completely foreign to the hymns. When we first meet with it, partly veiled, partly explicit, in the oldest Upanishads, are we in the presence of its first gropings towards realization and development ?—or are we in the presence of the partial infiltration into esoteric circles of a belief already dominant outside ?

It will be readily understood how important is

the answer which we have to give to this question and to many others related to it ; and it will be further understood why I lay so much stress on what I call the problem of tradition, if it is realized that literary work in India has been the almost exclusive monopoly of a privileged class ; that the ideas and systems of this class, with its prejudices and its pretensions, have always influenced its attitude and its manner of presenting facts, more especially those facts which they have drawn from outside. Many initial difficulties remain to be solved before the final answer can be given.

The Brāhmaṇas and their associated literature gravitate solely around the Veda and the Vedic sacrifice. Yet how artificial in character is everything in them which bears upon Vedic interpretation—etymologies, legends, theories ! How many incongruities and misunderstandings seem to betray a time when the meaning of the hymns was already obscure, when the ideas which animated them had ceased to be living and had become a field for the exercise of mysticism ! The language has in the interval been much modified. Is the epoch of the Brāhmaṇas, therefore, immediately connected, without interruption, with the epoch of the hymns ? Does it carry on the tradition intact ? Or has there occurred between the two some kind of break ?

Seeing further that, in spite of the close affinity

of language and idea which unites it, this sacerdotal literature extends over a considerable space of time, it is important to know whether the texts at our disposal are based on uniformly ancient materials, and to what extent they have been reshaped or rejuvenated.

It seems hardly possible, in view of the researches first initiated by Bergaigne, to regard the Vedic hymns in the same light as they were regarded by the preceding generation, namely, as the spontaneous and faithful reflection of the whole religious life at a given epoch. They are composed with a view to a complicated ceremonial, with singular refinements of thought and form ; whatever success they have achieved, however ample the authority which has finally fallen to their share, they are essentially ritual songs of those who made the sacrifice of the Soma ; they embrace no more than a sector of the religious horizon.

The Brāhmaṇas are still more clearly the work of a relatively narrow circle. They show the strivings of a scholastic mysticism thrown on its own resources and wrestling not so much with hereditary teaching as with its own speculations. But however that may be, there is one point at least which seems to me to authorize conjectures based on firmer ground.

Brahmanic Hinduism (as formulated in the editions which have reached us of the epics, the

law-books, and, with some secondary modifications, the Purāṇas) shows us by comparison with the Veda two divine types, which are either entirely new, such as Brahma, Śiva, Kṛishṇa, etc., or the profoundly transformed Viṣṇu, Indra, and Varuṇa; and also new governing ideas, like metempsychosis, the avatars, the great cosmic periods, the power of asceticism opposed to the power of gnosis, and so forth. I hardly think it is possible to trace this renewal merely to the elements known to us through the Śruti, even if we take into consideration the modifications to which they might have been subjected by the period when the sacerdotal literature was developing.

It must be admitted that a long-underlying current of what I have called popular Hinduism, under the direction of the Brahmans, who organized it to some extent and imposed on it the apotheosis of the Veda and of the privileged persons for whom it was reserved, finally took the form, reputed orthodox, of Brahmanic Hinduism. It is from this current that have, I believe, emerged, with a force which compelled the adherence and active help of the Brahmans, the ideas and the gods, the legends and the cults, which constitute the foundation of the system.

But, supposing this theory to be established, many obscurities still remain, as, for example,

how, when, and by what processes was fusion effected? Is the current of purely Āryan origin? To what extent is it mingled with aboriginal contributions? Does it proceed from a section of the Vedic people, or was it, in the beginning, the inheritance of a different wave of immigration?

What appears certain to me is that neither the Epic nor above all the Smṛiti should be accepted as honest and faithful witnesses of contemporary practices. The picture that they offer us is a composite one and very carefully designed; its authors, without being entirely successful in hiding the joints where the pieces have been fitted together, have fused a number of very varied elements into a theological and social order. They have certainly eliminated from it many features which did not suit their purpose; above all, they have disguised the disjointedness and discordances under a rather thin veneer of unity and harmony.

Will light ever dawn on these mysterious processes? It would be unreasonable to expect this so long as the fundamental chronological data are so uncertain.

At this very moment we are witnessing a strange spectacle. After the dazzling effect of the first discoveries, experts inclined more and more to reduce the age of Indian literature in all its

branches ; this tendency is to-day energetically combated. Is it simply a swing of the pendulum ? Is it a reaction of the traditionalist spirit ? At what point in such wide oscillations will the pendulum stop, when the field of uncertainty has been further narrowed down ? Everything turns upon a question of date, that is to say, whether we place the Vedic hymns 3500 or 1200 B.C., the composition of the Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 800 or 250 B.C., and whether we admit an interval of 500 or of 2,000 or 3,000 years between the appearance of the Ṛigveda and the Mahābhārata. Personally, I am disinclined to accept the remoter dates ; but this is not the place for personal impressions.

In any case, the problem of tradition will always be an imperative one. It will always commend itself with the same urgency to those who seek to obtain a clear view of the trend of India's beliefs, speculations, and institutions which form the bases of her individuality. Among these, caste occupies a prominent place. The perspectives opened up by its study are very instructive. I should be loath to seem to exaggerate the scope of this little book, but it brings once more under discussion an order of ideas on which I have long striven to focus attention, and without which one is tempted to follow an apparently simple though incorrect line of deduction in the history of religious

evolution. An occasion is now offered me to draw attention once again to these considerations, and I must be forgiven for taking advantage of it.

I must not entirely forget that I am here addressing myself not so much to my colleagues in Indianism as to a wider circle of readers. It has always been my desire to place within the grasp of all cultured minds exact and vivid ideas, such as can only be set down by one who has studied India somewhat closely. I have had such persons in mind while completing this reprint by the addition of bibliographical references. The literature on the subject is vast ; my scanty notes do not pretend to give even so much as an outline of it. They are merely indications which will have this merit at least : that they are modest enough not to discourage those who may only wish to regard them as light reading.



CASTE IN INDIA

PART I

THE PRESENT

Introductory. I. General Ideas. II. Marriage Laws. III. Hereditary Occupations. IV. Intercourse and Impure Contact. V. Various Rules; Religion and Caste. VI. Organization and Jurisdiction. VII. Disintegration and Multiplication of Castes

INTRODUCTORY

WE are all familiar with the word 'caste', and although the notion it conveys may be regarded with disfavour, the word itself has come to stay. It was borrowed from the Portuguese *casta*, which signifies properly 'breed'.

When they entered into relations with the peoples of the Malabar coast the Portuguese were quick to observe that the Hindus were divided into a great number of exclusive hereditary groups distinguished by their special occupations. They were graded in a sort of hierarchy, the upper groups refraining with superstitious care from all intercourse with those considered more lowly. It was to these sections that the Portuguese gave the name of *castes*. Eighteen centuries earlier

the first Greeks who had established anything approaching close intercourse with India were already struck by this peculiarity. Megasthenes, ambassador of Seleucus, informed his countrymen that the Hindus were split into 'divisions' (μέρη),¹ within which individuals were to some extent confined, being unable themselves to pass or to marry into any other section than that in which they were born, or to choose a profession different from that which had devolved on them by heredity.

The fact, then, is obvious enough ; its details and peculiar conditions are much more obscure. To every one, and to the foreigner especially, the private life of the Hindu is veiled in a kind of dignified shyness which is not at all easy to penetrate. The social organism of India, the play of its motive-forces, is, moreover, regulated infinitely more by custom, varying according to locality and baffling in its complexity, than by legal formulae laid down in authentic and easily accessible texts. The books which we are accustomed to regard as collections of laws do not

¹ The statement by Megasthenes that the number of μέρη was seven certainly rests on a merely superficial knowledge or interpretation of the facts. It is curious that precisely in the north-west of India we still find to-day that subdivision into seven clans is usual in many castes. Does the Greek evidence rest fundamentally on confusion with some such custom ? It is curious that Herodotus (II, 164), depicting Egyptian society as divided into castes, also enumerates seven of them. This number varies, however, among more recent authors (cf. Mallet, *Les Premiers Établissements des Grecs en Égypte*, pp. 410-11).

represent rules rigidly enforced in the civil sphere. They are sacerdotal works, and leave undefined a number of interesting points. In many respects they express a certain theological ideal rather than actual statements adapted to meet real conditions.

Already complicated by the conflicting nature of the various facts, the student is therefore more hindered than helped by a legal theory misleading in its precision. Its authority is placed so high that this doctrinal barrier leaves free passage for a very different practice and a great variety of unforeseen developments. Its effects have at all times appeared wavering and uncertain. It is not then to be wondered at that the public mind, misled on so delicate and unfamiliar a subject, has formed certain conclusions which are as generally accepted as they are untrue. The nature of the facts has in consequence been gravely distorted.

The Hindu castes are generally conceived as a political system of inviolable stability, confining the individual to occupations handed down immutably from father to son. However great the personal initiative, it offers no chance of rising in the social scale. One imagined Brahmans who may only consecrate themselves to the religious life and ritual, soldiers who may only be recruited from the warrior class, chiefs who may only be

drawn from the royal and military caste—all so arranged that nothing has ever disturbed, or ever can disturb, an order protected from time immemorial. It is thus, I believe, that Hindu society is commonly pictured.

Since the last century there has been abundant speculation on this view of the organization, and the same fixed idea has persisted down to our own times. Men of intelligence, whose pursuits have brought them into constant touch with the facts, have recently, even since the modern progress of comparative law, regarded the caste institution in this light ; they denounce in it the deliberate and treacherous scheming of an ambitious class ; the origin of social institutions may be discovered in a gratuitous pact.¹ Is it to be wondered at ? To do so would be to forget how strong is the power of preconceived ideas coined into current phraseology. Such errors prove at least the difficulty of the question, and it is all the more interesting since it deals with a unique phenomenon—a social order known only in India. Its solution is therefore well worth consideration.

This solution has to-day assumed more importance than ever, but has also become less

¹ I could quote numerous examples, but will content myself with referring to Sherring's article in the *Calcutta Review* of 1880 on the 'Natural History of Caste'. It is striking how the pandit Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, in attempting to reply, remains influenced by analogous views, although rejecting them in some particulars.

difficult. The relationship established between the Indo-European languages has brought the Āryan conquerors of India very near to us and aroused our curiosity about them. The affinity which has been revealed little by little between ancient peoples, not only in religious tradition but in the elements of social organization, has strengthened those bonds which were formed at first by a similarity of idiom. From this community of language and customs has there not been a tendency sometimes to draw too sweeping conclusions as to community of race? Certainly the common origin of institutions which, having dominated the past of our remote ancestors, are still evident in our own times, endows the different stages of evolution through which they have passed with a peculiar interest for us, and, if I may venture to say so, with an unusual piquancy.

At first comparison was made between those races whose idioms showed relationship. Curiosity quickly outgrew these bounds and embraced indiscriminately all the various kinds of primitive constitutions. I will not assert that scholarship has not sometimes lost in accuracy what it has gained in breadth. Though rash, these bold voyages of discovery into the unknown have not been altogether fruitless. They have given training in observation and critical insight, which has

been of the greatest use to more timid, or, if you will, more prudent, research. During this time documents were accumulating from which we have gained a more complete and precise knowledge of the prevailing conditions in India. The official publications of the vice-regal government enjoy a well-earned reputation. A number of reports based on the last census returns add to statistical data, which are themselves very valuable, accounts and actual memoirs which are no less important. We are obtaining more information at a time when we are becoming better able to profit by it.

The able works of Nesfield and Ibbetson on the North-West Provinces and the Panjab were afterwards supplemented by the researches of Risley on the *Tribes and Castes of Bengal*. This work, carried out with all the elaboration peculiar to anthropology, finally resulted in a vast ethnographical glossary. In this the author has condensed his comprehensive views together with an infinite number of facts. The care and systematic labour with which he has assembled and checked his scattered information can be imagined. Inspired with a legitimate faith in his great task, he makes an urgent appeal to technical criticism. I do not flatter myself that I can answer that appeal here. I desire merely to make use of some of his ideas and indications.

These are primarily concerned with actual facts, and it may perhaps be of interest to consider them from the point of view of archaeology and history, which is my own province.¹



¹ I should like to mention here the general reports of J. Baines on the census of India in 1891. This vast production, the work of a resourceful and penetrating mind, forms a worthy conclusion to the series of documents of the same order to which I have referred in this study. As it is designed in the first place to summarize and co-ordinate statistical results, it is not of a nature to furnish me with much fresh information bearing upon either the general survey or the historical views which it is my intention to present here.

I. GENERAL IDEAS

WE are inclined, when dealing with social customs foreign to our country and civilization, to judge them by our own standards of conduct ; but we must drop this habit when we are discussing India.

Our Western world is enclosed in a network of institutions and laws which leave the least possible margin for the unexpected and for variety and conflict of ideas. India is governed essentially by custom, an authority both tenacious and capricious, and subject to endlessly changing local influences. It is very powerful in its immediate action, and disregards completely the importance of general and dispassionate views. The rule of custom involves complex processes of an unstable and incoherent nature as opposed to those of an ordered simplicity. This springs from the fact that Hindu society, in spite of the years behind it, has down to our own times remained very primitive in type. It has given rise to no state which is comparable even with the narrow government of the cities of antiquity, still less with our modern state. In the absence of all proper political law, the influence, both religious and

social, of the Brahmans has found it an easy task, by exercising incessant pressure throughout the centuries, slowly to imprint on the whole a common physiognomy and to reduce below a certain level the most blatant contradictions. It has not effected unity, still less uniformity. It has not even been able to produce national unity, the lack of which is significant and extremely important.

The Āryan penetration has taken place gradually and unequally throughout India. It is doubtful whether, even in the north-west, the influx of the conquering race was great enough to overwhelm or completely to absorb the former populations, which were of different origin. In the south the infiltration came later and was more restricted, so that the non-Āryan races form a substantial element throughout India, even if not the major part of the population. In spite of the uniform veneer spread over the whole by the conquering civilization, certain customs, traditions, and tendencies foreign or contrary to it have therefore survived. Even to-day groups of these ancient populations are entering under our very eyes into the general structure of the vast Brahmanic community.

It will be foreseen what complications and incoherences so active and unstable a mixture is bound to cause, and how these must be taken into account by any one who wishes for a true and

vivid picture of the existing conditions. Even the most general facts are subject to an infinity of exceptions. A systematic exposition would be immense, so vast is the ground to be covered, and any summary is necessarily imperfect, and in a sense fallacious, so varied are the aspects of the question. It is not my business to attempt here either one or the other ; but it is necessary at least to try to present the problem clearly.

Leaving out of account certain populations definitely inferior by race, isolated by geographical conditions and by history, and secondary in numerical importance, the whole of India appears to us not as a simple collection of individuals, but as a mass of corporate unities. Their numbers, names, character, and functions are infinitely diverse ; they form everywhere the invariable and apparently necessary framework of the population. The family-community has been maintained or restored in vast regions ; the village-community owes its right of self-government either to traditional custom or, more especially, to the impotence of the central power, which, before the advent of British rule, drew up no wise measures : it was inclined to confine its normal activities to tax-collecting. But I have in view groups less restricted than these. They are not by their nature attached to any definite geographical division ; they include many villages,

or are involved in the same domain with a multitude of analogous groups. Unequal in number and opposed in customs, they have, however, common traits which place them in the same category: they are distinguished by special names, and meet together in assemblies to confer on certain matters. They isolate themselves sedulously in order to avoid intermarriage and to keep the rule which prohibits any contact or sharing of meals between them. Each is differentiated by his special hereditary occupation. Their jurisdiction keeps watch over the strict observance of the rules sanctioned by tradition. These groups are *castes*—or, it should be added, *quasi-castes*.

In reality, all these, in spite of the general resemblance both of the practices they observe and of the machinery by which they are maintained, are profoundly different. Many have entirely local existences, and several have very exceptional laws. The military aristocracy of the Nayars, confined to the coast of Malabar, is founded on polyandry. In the Panjab, where the Muslim conquest and the constant infiltration of foreign elements has reacted perceptibly on the social constitution of the country, large classes—for example, the Pathans and the Baluchis,¹

¹ Denzil Charles Jelf Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Panjab* (1881), Calcutta, 1883, v. I, p. 176.

whose name attests a more or less purely geographical origin—are free from several laws which are essential characteristics of the caste, as properly defined. At another extremity of India, in Bengal, a number of corporate unities, while approximating as closely as they can to the constitution laid down for the caste by Brahmanic precepts, are betrayed either by their name or by the authoritative agreement of all witnesses, as imperfectly assimilated non-Āryan groups. Their inclusion in the scheme of Hindu organization is more or less arbitrary. It is the same everywhere, so that the ideas of tribe and caste are closely connected and sometimes even confused.

It is necessary, however, that we should determine approximately the most general features which characterize caste, in so far as it is possible to trace its lesser branches to a common type.

The castes have often been compared—particularly by Hindus of English upbringing, who are very anxious at heart to lessen the distance between our races and theirs and to lower the barriers which separate India from Europe—with the social distinctions that exist amongst us. The gradations among the different castes, varying according to district, but clearly established in each by public feeling, furnish a natural excuse for this comparison. Caste, however, corresponds only very remotely to our social

classes. Its constitution is far stronger and its implications far more precise. It is an institution, and an essential one.

It embraces not only a very great majority of the population of India, but it forms the normal framework of society, and is intimately connected with its religious life. It has been found possible, therefore, not without apparent justification, to regard it as the very soul of this somewhat indeterminate, fluid collection of customs and beliefs which is called Hinduism. A great many doctrines, more or less heterodox, have arisen which—either in clear theoretical terms, or indirectly by the logic of their teaching—attacked its legitimacy or undermined its foundations. These doctrines have either disappeared or lingered on in obscurity; caste has survived indestructible. Islam, having penetrated into India by main force, has won an important place there. Little by little caste has triumphed over natural opposition and distaste, and has seldom failed to draw the Muslims into its irresistible bonds. It is by adopting the official type of the caste that, even in our own times, the aboriginal populations, which have remained longest outside Hindu civilization, force an entry and claim common rights.

In spite of the confusion which is due to inexactitude of speech, there are, properly speaking,

no *outcasts* in India. Individuals, driven by various causes from their native caste, quickly form the nucleus of new groups. Two courses only are open to them : either to become members of the lower castes, or to join with companions in misfortune and form new castes. It is obvious that in the normal working of all these exclusive sets there is no possible life for the isolated individual. The Pariah, upon whom, since Bernadin de Saint-Pierre, so much sympathy has been lavished, is not the lonely, banished creature one generally imagines. He belongs to a group, though it may be very poor and much despised. There are Pariah castes which, in spite of the disdain of the Brahmans, are not deterred from holding a high opinion of themselves ; they find neighbours to look down upon.

This shows the vast number of these groups of people, castes or tribes analogous to castes. There may be hundreds of them in one province. I have counted more than 120 in the district of Poona alone, which has about 900,000 inhabitants, yet this figure gives only an imperfect idea of the real partition : it represents the number of castes properly so-called. The greater part, however, are split up into subdivisions, which, though they share a generic name and have similar customs, form in several respects, notably in the matter of marriage, so many distinct castes. In this same

district of Poona the Brahmans, whom theoretically we have been accustomed to regard as a single caste throughout the whole of India, are really divided up into fifteen castes. Some of them, and those not the most extensive, are themselves split up into several subdivisions, which never intermarry. It is the same everywhere.

Surveys, drawn up on the census returns of 1881, record no less than 855 different castes, numbering at least a thousand members or divided amongst several provinces or native states. If we add those which are less numerous or which exist only in one province or in one state, we reach the figure of 1929. But these calculations are far exceeded by the truth. Under a single head are registered nearly 14,000,000 Brahmans, 12,000,000 Kunbis, 11,000,000 Chamars, etc. All these, though claiming the same title, are in reality resolved into a multitude of secondary castes, which form as many autonomous bodies. These last, more often than not, despise each other and refuse as a rule either to intermarry or to eat together. It is, indeed, a characteristic tendency among all the castes to subdivide into more and more multiple groups, like coteries in the same social sphere.

The names borne by castes and sub-castes are not always clear in their meaning. Apart from two or three generic and traditional titles, such

as those of Brahman and Rajput, the greater number of those whose meaning can be discerned trace their origin to one or other of the following four categories: geographical names borrowed either from a mere locality or from a province; professional names, referring either to an occupation peculiar to the group, or, in the case of some of the Brahman castes, a special feature in their sacerdotal functions—names of objects or of animals particularly connected with the group by traditional legends or religious practices; and lastly, family names going back, either directly or through a nickname, to a supposed ancestor. As may easily be imagined, the castes bearing names which seem to call for explanation are rarely at a loss for legends, however improbable, to account for their origin. In most cases the connexion has to be reversed: it is more usual for the name to have inspired the story than for the story to have given rise to the name.

Of such tales those most deserving of belief are undoubtedly the traditions which refer to more or less remote migrations, which are commemorated in the name of the caste. They show that these migrations were very frequent, especially among the higher castes, and they are not the less significant for that. National feeling exists hardly at all; life is much more narrowly focused. The community of the caste or the tribe is strong

enough in its solidarity and tradition to fulfil all needs. This society constitutes the true fatherland. Under its protection there is little stability, and in the past there was even less. Individuals carried about with them the household gods which they prized most highly; the swarming groups were re-established without difficulty in new surroundings under the permanent influence of the same instincts. India thus appears to us more than ever as an immense complexity of mobile organisms. They are united by widely different factors, amongst which it is at once evident that varieties of origin and race occupy an important position.

Is it to the persistence of memories and to the enmities which they awaken that we must trace the dissensions which are perpetuated in many places between various castes? They are all the more striking as the peoples concerned are by nature the more peace-loving. The most lasting and notorious hostility is that which, in the south of India, divides what is called the 'right hand' and the 'left hand'. The two sets correspond roughly, it seems, to a division into artisan and agricultural castes.¹ It has never been possible to explain its origin and history. So much is certain, that their rivalry has been and still is the source of violent quarrels which divide the

¹ Cf. Burnell-Yule, *Hobson Jobson*, s.v. 'Caste'.

population into opposing camps. Certain privileges claimed by one or the other 'hand', if ever so slightly infringed, kindle the conflict.¹ It has often provoked risings which 'spreading from place to place, have sown trouble over a wide stretch of territory and given occasion for all kinds of excesses which often end in bloody battles'.

Similar facts, though on a smaller scale, are found in many parts of the country.² Often rival claims to honours give rise, either as cause or pretext, to these struggles. Trivial enough in our eyes, they inflame those concerned to an extraordinary degree. The reason is that the organization of the castes has become the foundation of a veritable hierarchy: each one has its particular rank, defined by tradition or public opinion, and each one maintains it at all costs, or strives to advance itself. This is a trait which is entirely characteristic of the general nature of the institution.

The pivot of this hierarchy is the recognized superiority of the Brahmanic caste and of its numerous branches. Some writers have gone so far as to say that the place assigned to each caste depends essentially on its relation to the Brahmanic caste, on the marks of consideration or

¹ Abbé Dubois, *Mœurs*, etc., v. I, pp. 15 et seq.

² E.g. cf. the account 'Caste Factions' by Elliot in the *Asiatic Quarterly*, April 1892, pp. 438 et seq.

disdain which it receives from the latter.¹ In spite of the relative disrepute into which a number of their castes have fallen the Brahmans hold a dominant position almost everywhere.² Their religious ascendancy has assured a high degree of authority to sects which, to a great extent, are founded on religious precepts and prejudices. It is very rarely that their superiority has been disputed.³ Often, however, the struggle among less favoured classes to emulate them has been obstinate and violent. All the castes, even the most despised, are animated by vanity and by a passion to be exclusive, which has strangely embittered these quarrels. Every means, from trickery and corruption to open force, is brought into play by the various groups in order to confirm or acquire such prerogatives as will raise them in public esteem.⁴

We have to deal with vast territories, where races differing in origin and habits jostle and mingle with one another; where groups are intermixed and unequally developed; split up *ad infinitum*, are easily changed about, and are sometimes engaged in bitter struggles amongst themselves. Must we therefore abandon the

¹ Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, *Calcutta Review*, October 1880, pp. 81-2; cf. Guru Proshad Sen, *ibid.*, July 1890, pp. 61-5.

² E.g. cf. Dubois, *op. laud.*, v. I, pp. 143-4 and 161.

³ Cf., however, Dubois, I, 13.

⁴ Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, July 1890, pp. 54-5; Steele, *Hindoo Castes*, pp. 96-7.

attempt to give a picture of the caste institution as a whole? The attempt cannot indeed fail to be incomplete, but it will not necessarily be false and misleading. Whatever incongruities may be cloaked by the apparent unity of the system, it is really based on many fundamental analogies. It will be enough to remember that no assertion should be regarded as absolute, that the relationship of facts leaves room for a multitude of fine shades of difference, and that only the most general characteristics are common to the whole domain.

This being clearly understood, let us picture a corporate group, exclusive and, in theory at least, rigorously hereditary. It possesses a certain traditional and independent organization, a chief and a council, and as occasion demands it meets in assemblies endowed with more or less full authority. Often united in the celebration of certain festivals, it is further bound together by a common profession and by the practice of common customs which bear more especially upon marriage, food, and various cases of impurity. Finally, it is armed, in order to assure its authority, with a jurisdiction of fairly wide extent, capable by the infliction of certain penalties, especially of banishment, either absolute or revocable, enforcing the power of the community. Such, briefly, is the caste system as it appears to us.



II. MARRIAGE LAWS

WE are in the presence of an hereditary organization ; marriage laws therefore must and do occupy the first place in its mechanism. This is so striking that some writers have been led to represent the rules and restrictions concerning it as the very essence of the caste—an exaggeration, but a significant one.

Whatever may have been the rule in earlier times, polygamy is to-day the recognized and authorized system of marriage in India. This does not mean that it is universally or even generally practised. It is kept within bounds by poverty, and also, within a restricted circle, by the slow infiltration of Western ideas. Nevertheless, it exists absolutely in law and often in fact. However, except in particular cases, we may suitably leave it out of account when describing caste, and all the more readily because a special sanctity seems always to have attached to the first marriage, and a superior authority and dignity to have been reserved for the first wife.¹

This point being disposed of, it is permissible

¹ Ibbetson, § 380.

to summarize in a very comprehensive survey the essentials of the law that caste imposes on marriage. This law has a twofold aspect: it both prescribes and limits. It describes a double circle: the wider one within which marriage must take place, and the narrower one drawn inside the first, within which it is forbidden to marry. Our own prohibited degrees of consanguinity give us an idea, although inadequate, of the second; while the restrictions imposed by the first are, legally at any rate, unknown to us. We may formulate the double rule by saying that one is obliged to marry within the caste and forbidden to marry within the family.

These terms, however wide they may be, demand a mass of commentaries and limitations in order to achieve exactitude. The anthropological sciences have within recent years created certain technical terms, somewhat uncouth but too convenient and already too widespread for me not to ask permission to introduce them here. They will save us from confusing periphrases. The custom which imposes marriage within the fixed circle has been called *endogamy*, and the law which ordains marriage outside a fixed circle *exogamy*. Now, with us there is only a law of exogamy—that which forbids marriage within the radius of degrees of close consanguinity.

The law of the caste, on the contrary, is a law of endogamy as regards the caste and of exogamy as regards the family. Within these vague confines it is absolute. But it must be seen in operation.

The first rule is very general; it displays, however, strongly marked distinctions in the actual caste, and in the tribe. It is much more strict in the first, more strict at least than in the Muslim tribes or quasi-castes. Though generally endogamous, they are not strictly so; the Baluchis and the Pathans¹ merely require that the first wife of a chief be taken in the tribe. The Gakkhars of the Panjab ally themselves with other tribes, while the Awans hardly ever unite except with women of their own race.² But we are here on the frontier, amongst the populations in which the memory of a foreign origin survives. Farther into the interior of India the Muslims, probably in imitation of the true castes, are usually stricter. They seldom marry outside the *Kuff*—that is to say, a certain group of villages inhabited by Muslims of their caste.³ The still more or less barbarous tribes which general opinion holds to be chiefly aboriginal, approximate roughly to the usages of the castes.

They all split up almost invariably into a

¹ Ibbetson, § 391.

² Ibid., §§ 464, 466.

³ Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, July 1890, p. 57.

sometimes considerable number of divisions. Although included under a common name, these really constitute so many castes between which marriage is never allowed. As a Hindu himself remarks: 'The Brahmans of Bengal do not marry with the Brahmans of other regions, nor the Kāyasths (*scribes*) or other castes of Bengal with their respective castes in other parts of India. Moreover, amongst the Brahmans of Bengal, the Rahri Brahmans do not marry with the Varendra or Vaidika or Dakkhinatwa Brahmans. The Ballalseni Vaidyas (doctors) who live in eastern Bengal do not marry with the Lakmanseni Vaidyas who live in the west of the province, and the four classes of the Bengali Kāyasths never intermarry amongst themselves. In Upper India, marriage is forbidden between the sections of the Kāyasths, the number of which here amounts to twelve.' This is only one example. The most resolute advocate of the purely professional origin of the castes, Nesfield, states that all the nominal castes are thus resolved into a number of sections which are castes proper. In the north-west provinces he counts seven of these among the Barhais or carpenters, ten among the Kāyasths or scribes, thirty among the Chatris (cultivators or landed proprietors), and forty among the Brahmans.¹ Elsewhere things are no different,

¹ Nesfield, *Caste System*, § 192.

and it would be both superfluous and tedious to mention more names.

We find the same tendency, either natural or copied from the Brahmans, prevailing among peoples who by reason of their primitive habits are regarded as aboriginal.¹ And it is in the guise of endogamous groups that they enter the common pale of Hinduism. Risley² puts their divisions into several categories: ethnic, linguistic, local, occupational, sectarian, and social, according to the basis on which each group has been established. We are such slaves to habit that even numbers are apt to become conventionalized: the division into seven castes seems, if I may venture so to express it, to be the fashion in the Panjab.³

The principle is very widespread, but never absolute. A caste such as that of the Khatris in the Panjab⁴ is regulated in this respect by complicated arrangements which authorize marriage between certain sections of the caste and not between others. Among various Rajput populations⁵ several clans intermarry, while they

¹ E.g. on the four great sections of the Minas, cf. Lyall, *Asiatic Studies*, p. 162; on the Mhars, *Poona Gazetteer*, I, p. 262, etc.

² *Ethnogr. Gloss.*, pp. lxxi et seq.

³ Among the Chamars, the Dhanuks, the Khobis, the Karchis, etc.; cf. Elliot, *The Races of the North-Western Provinces of India*, ed. Beames, v. I, pp. 70, 79, 81, 145, etc.

⁴ Ibbetson, § 540.

⁵ Cf., for example, Elliot, loc. laud., s.v. 'Bisens'.

exclude others from this privilege ; but this rule is often broken by anomalies. We see, for example, the Gaur Brahmans agreeing at Delhi to unions that similar castes reject in the Doab and Rohilkhand.¹ These are some examples amongst a hundred similar eccentricities. In spite of the value unanimously accorded to equality between husband and wife, more than one caste, and not necessarily the lowest, making very substantial concessions in practice, accepts betrothal from a lower caste.² It is a spirit of compromise imposed by special circumstances, reviving a state of things which must have been regarded long ago with less disfavour than is now the case.

These exceptions do not impair the validity of the law ; the endogamy of the caste or of the tribe is, on the contrary, one of the most constant rules. It has its no less essential opposite point in the exogamy of the family or of the clan.

It is not easy to find a suitable name for this little exogamous circle enclosed within the wider periphery of the caste. Its limits, definition, and title vary to an extreme degree. On the other hand, it exists almost invariably and its effects make themselves felt everywhere. So great is the

¹ Elliot, p. 112. Likewise the Rajput Gautamas, *ibid.*, p. 119.

² For the Srotiyas of Bengal cf. Nil Kant Chatterjee, *Calcutta Review*, July 1891, p. 132. Other examples in Ibbetson, § 512.

confusion that Hindu casuists have been obliged to abandon the attempt to establish systematic regulation. They have accepted as law the recognized usage in each family or in each group.¹ In spite of everything, the general rule stands out in very high relief. It may be summed up in a word: marriage in the *gotra* to which an individual belongs is forbidden.² Such at least is the traditional law established by the Brahmins.

The *gotra* denotes an eponymous group which is reputed to descend in its entirety from a common ancestor, who should properly be a *rishi*, a legendary priest or saint. The number of these is limited, so that the same *gotras* are to be met with, however abnormal this arrangement may appear to us, amongst people who belong to different castes. The *gotra* is peculiar to the Brahmanic caste. It is true that we find it extended to the other high castes by religious law, to the Kshatriyas and Vaiśyas, but at the price of obvious artifices.³ Brahmanic *rishis* can hardly in strict logic have been able to found any but Brahman stock. It is as frivolous to attribute to families the *gotra* of their priests and religious

¹ V. N. Mandlik, *Vyavahāra Mayūkha*, pp. 353 et seq., 412 et seq.

² I leave on one side the community of *Pravara* (concerning which cf. V. N. Mandlik, op. laud., p. 414), which is essentially one with the *gotra*.

³ V. N. Mandlik, pp. 412-13.

preceptors, who are necessarily of different orders, as to include all the families who do not know their *gotra* in that which recognizes Jamadagni as its founder. In fact, the Brahmans are alone in the somewhat general possession of *gotras*.¹ But a more or less faithful imitation of the institution and even of its name, has been transplanted into a great number of castes, especially amongst the merchant classes, who pride themselves on conforming to the Brahmanic rule.² The name has travelled so far afield that in many cases it has ended by assuming a meaning very distant from its primitive one, a fact from which considerable confusion has resulted, even in the census returns.

The exogamous group exists even amongst the Muslim tribes of the frontier zone, who can barely be regarded as forming part of the Hindu community. Sometimes it is very restricted; but it is present everywhere in spite of the tendency of the Muslim populations to marry within a limited radius.³ The exceptions, if such there be, are so rare and can be explained by such special circumstances that they are negligible.⁴

¹ V. N. Mandlik, p. 352; Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, July 1890, pp. 59, etc.

² As examples it is enough to refer to Steele, *Hindoo Castes*, pp. 36, 37, 162, 166; Elliot, *op. laud.*, pp. 3, 32, 535; Hunter, *Orissa*, t. II, pp. 39-40; Ibbetson, §§ 353, 533; *Poona Gazetteer*, v. I, pp. 266, 375, 401.

³ Ibbetson, §§ 136, 357, 380, 393.

⁴ Risley, *Ethnogr. Gloss.*, pp. xlvii-xlviii; v. I, p. 41.

To an even greater degree does this statement apply to the Hindus. Risley has carefully studied this category of facts. He has distinguished the very different moulds in which, according to circumstances, the exogamous sections from various levels of Hindu society seem to have been cast, particularly in the very low castes which have sprung from the strata of aboriginal populations : vicinity ; common ancestry, authentic and supposed ; a common surname regarded as a sign of relationship ; a common cult for that category of objects or animals to which ethnography gives the name of *totem*, which are connected with the clan by some superstitious legend. Several of these principles of division, the last especially, have an archaic, uncivilized aspect, which carry us back to a remote period previous to any Āryan influence. This is not, however, the moment to explore the delicate question of origins. Brahmanic influence has been at work for long centuries past. It is recognizable by certain errors ; the zeal for imitation is more ardent than judicious. A low caste, claiming to follow Brahmanic rules, may resolve itself into exogamous fractions, while constituting a single eponymous group and even expressly attaching itself to one single *gotra*.¹

However different may be the names taken by

¹ Ibbetson, § 544.

these groups according to circumstances and locality, it is convenient to have a simple term by which to denote them as a whole. *Gotra* may be retained for this purpose, since the word is sanctioned both by technical language and by common parlance where its meaning is not always obvious. Its influence has made itself felt everywhere but is not always equally strict.

It may be said that individuals are everywhere forbidden to marry within the *gotra* of which they bear the name, hence within the paternal *gotra*. But this prohibition does not exhaust the legal impediments. The usual rule is that a man may not marry into the *gotra* of his mother either, nor often into that of his father's mother, nor sometimes into the clan of his mother's mother.¹

Exogamy on the maternal side varies very much in scope. Castes or tribes may be cited which, beside and below the *gotras*, have smaller groups for the purpose, it seems, of delimiting exogamy on the maternal side.² In any case, the impediments resulting from the *gotra* are further complicated by a table of prohibited degrees. The *gotra* itself varies according to caste, locality, and time. It is, all things considered, very much more comprehensive than that in which are

¹ Ibbetson, § 683 ; Elliot, p. 110 ; Risley, v. I, p. 310.

² Risley, pp. lv-lvi.

embodied among us the surviving remnants of exogamic reservations. Marriage is forbidden between betrothed persons who stand in the relationship denoted in Sanskrit by the word *sapinda*. This relationship extends to the sixth degree if the common ancestor is a man ; if a woman, opinions differ : prohibition comprises according to some six degrees, according to others four only.¹ Commentators have reckoned that on an exhaustive calculation this rule excludes marriage in the case of 2,121 possible relationships. In the usages, the variants and the uncertainties to which they are subject, there is a fine source of hair-splitting, academic discussion ; it is easy to imagine how it has appealed to the Hindu experts ! It has no attraction for us and only an indirect bearing on the question with which we are concerned.²

From the point of view of the caste, the general and curious fact which it is important to bear in mind is the double rule which we stated in the beginning : the prohibition of marriage outside the caste and the obligation of marriage outside the *gotra*. The relationship which prevents marriage is above all agnatic relationship—relationship on the male side. The results of relationship on the

¹ H. Mayne, *Hindu Law and Usage*, p. 77 ; J. S. Siromani, *Comment. on the Hindu Law*, pp. 70 et seq.

² It will suffice to refer the curious to the chapter which V. N. Mandlik has devoted to this subject, *Vyavahāra Mayūkha*, pp. 346 et seq.

female side are always much less prohibitive. In certain cases the obstacles which it sets up are narrowly limited, and castes are cited in which a certain relationship, although distant, on the female side is considered desirable, if not necessary, between the betrothed.¹



¹ Lyall, *Berar Gazetteer*, p. 187.

III. HEREDITARY OCCUPATIONS

A RECENT theory, supported by an exceedingly shrewd and expert judge, has claimed that common occupation forms the very foundation and principle of the caste. This is perhaps the conception which remains uppermost in the minds of those who content themselves with a certain amount of approximate ideas on the subject. But it would be an exaggeration to imagine Hindu society as enclosed according to the occupations of its members in a chessboard of unchangeable and impassable squares. It is true that many castes are called by the name of the profession which in general they follow: potters, blacksmiths, fishermen, gardeners, etc. It is necessary to remember that the names of trades which are presented to us as caste-names really embrace a larger area, and that the true caste, characterized and limited by the marriage laws, is much more restricted. Thus Banyas, or merchants, in the Panjab,¹ to take only one example, are split up into sections under geographical names such as the Agarwals, the Oswals, etc., which, being endogamous, clearly form as many

¹ Ibbetson, § 532.

distinct castes. A professional caste therefore does not embrace in one single unit all the people who live by the calling from which it takes its name. It is even a common experience to find gathered under a single trade-name people who very obviously derive from distinct castes and tribes.¹

On the other hand, members of the same caste may earn their living in very different ways, the most notable instance being the low and despised castes, reputed to be of non-Āryan origin. Condemned to perform all the menial tasks, they follow to some extent any and every kind of inferior occupation. The Baris, in the North-West Provinces, make torches and act as barbers,² the Banjaras³ comprise merchants, bards, shepherds and agriculturists. Elsewhere cotton-beaters, oil-pressers, and butchers rub elbows in a single caste.⁴ Examples could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. They are not confined to the lowlier castes. Nesfield⁵ himself explains that among the merchants the professional distinction is practically nil, and that all their castes may engage in trade without possessing prescriptive rights to any one branch. He states⁶ that numbers of people

¹ See the case of the Sangtarash or stone-cutters according to Nesfield, *Caste System*, § 62; cf. Ibbetson, § 366. At Poona the Salis and the Sangars are both weavers, *Poona Gazetteer*, pp. 365, etc.

² Elliot, p. 49.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-5; on the Kunbis, p. 156.

⁴ Ibbetson, §§ 646-7.

⁵ *Caste System*, p. 78.

⁶ *Ibid.*, § 81.

change their occupations without leaving their caste. That is quite evident.

It is no less certain that the enormous number of castes devoted to agriculture does not correspond to the same number of professional distinctions, present or past. The castes in this category have shown an incessant tendency to gain ground. In proportion as the non-Āryan tribes have drawn closer to Hindu civilization, they have become predominantly agricultural ; in proportion as the peace maintained by British rule has discouraged the profession of arms, agriculture has gained in man-power. This is but one of the elements which, from the point of view of allocation, conspire to disturb uniformity.

Let us begin, first of all, at the very top of the scale. It is perhaps among the Brahmans that there occurs the most complicated mixture of occupations and confusion of trades. If we were to go no farther than the old idea of a caste of Brahmans consecrated solely to religious practice and study and to a life of austerity or meditation, this would be extremely disconcerting. Those who have seen Brahmans girded with the sacred thread offering water at Indian stations to travellers, and who have also seen them drilling among the sepoys of the Anglo-Indian Army, are prepared for surprises of this kind. As a matter of fact, people who proudly bear the title of

Brahman and to whom everywhere this title assures great respect, may be found engaged in all sorts of tasks : priests and ascetics, learned men and religious beggars, but also cooks and soldiers, scribes and merchants, cultivators and shepherds, even masons and chair-porters.¹

There are even more extraordinary facts : the Sanauriya Brahmans of Bundelkhand² have robbery as their hereditary profession. It is true that they only follow it by day, and the respect of the Hindus for the Brahmans goes so far that, if one is to believe a perhaps ironical proverb, to be robbed by them should be regarded as a favour from heaven. For the rest, there are not wanting other castes of robbers, although of less lofty pretensions.³

This diversity of occupations in the Brahmanic caste is nothing new. A very similar state of things is already sanctioned by the laws of Manu and by other equally venerable authorities. I hasten to add that in many cases these distinctions give birth to those new sub-castes which are to

¹ Hunter has in this connexion entered into very curious details, whatever may be the value of the theories which he mingles with facts, *Orissa*, I, pp. 239 et seq. On Brahman cultivators the reader may also compare Ibbetson, § 512, Elliot, I, p. 94 ; on Brahman tradesmen, Ibbetson, § 361 ; and generally, on the variety of the professions followed by Brahmans, Dubois, *Mœurs*, etc., I, pp. 410 et seq. ; Nesfield, *Caste System*, § 133, etc.

² Nesfield, § 134.

³ Dubois, I, pp. 5, 77 ; Steele, *Hindoo Castes*, p. 121 ; *Poona Gazetteer*, I, pp. 464 et seq.

me the true castes ; but this result is far from being invariable.

The intrusion of these numerous peoples, who, inferior to the average level of Āryan castes, cause disturbance and instability in the system, may also have contributed to break down the rigour of the principle. I readily admit that speciality and heredity of occupation have not only been a powerful bond within the caste, but have often been the centre of attraction round which new groups have gathered. In spite of everything it is evident that hereditary community of profession is seriously upset by the arrangement of the caste-system.



IV. INTERCOURSE AND IMPURE CONTACT

THE proverb according to which 'caste is only a question of food' is an answer to those to whom it is a question of trade.

It proves at least that habit has not been able to lessen, even for the Hindus, the surprise we experience at the scrupulous care with which they observe two very complicated and hampering laws: the first is to refuse any food which may have been prepared or merely touched by people of a caste which they consider inferior; the second is never to take meals with people of a lower caste, which, by virtue of a natural reciprocity, amounts to not taking meals with anybody but equals. Here is a rule which would be strangely disturbing to our democratic habits. Even in India it is not without its drawbacks. The scruples which it maintains have done much to render intercourse between Europeans and natives rarer and more difficult and to prevent Hindus reaping in their travels the benefits of Western civilization.

The Hindus are at all times great lovers of feasts; common meals occur on all solemn

occasions.¹ These restrictions are therefore the more significant. Their authority is so absolute that the Santals—a very low caste in Bengal—have been known to die of hunger in times of famine rather than touch food even prepared by Brahmans.² This reservation, applied to the caste which is regarded as the highest and surrounded by such grovelling respect, shows how ingenious and fertile scruples can be and what variations they often embroider on a primitive theme.

Speaking generally, we may take it that only those may eat together who are allowed to intermarry. So here also we must interpret caste in the narrow sense. The twelve sections of the Kāyasths of Bengal may no more eat in company than they may permit alliances with one another.³ However, all things considered, the prohibition here is less strict. Many sections of castes between which marriage is unlawful do not refrain from sharing meals together. Moreover, custom in this respect varies from one part of the country to another, still more than do the marriage laws, and even in the same caste according to the districts amongst which it is dispensed.⁴ The law, however, exists everywhere, though it is complicated

¹ Cf. Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, *Calcutta Review*, October 1880, p. 280.

² Barth, *Revue Critique*, 1880, v. II, p. 243.

³ Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, July 1890, pp. 53-4.

⁴ One or two examples in Elliot, p. 6.

by distinctions which seem odd but are exceedingly instructive. 'Broadly speaking,' says a report quoted by Ibbetson,¹ 'no superior tribe will eat or drink from the hands or vessels of an inferior one. But the reputed purifying influences of fire, especially as exercised upon butter and sugar, and the superior cleanliness of metal over earthen vessels, are the foundation of a broad distinction. All food is divided into *pakkī rōṭī*, i.e. bread fried dry with butter; and *kachchhī rōṭī*, i.e. bread not so treated. A Gujarat Brahman will eat the *pakkī* but not the *kachchī rōṭī* from a Gaur; a Gaur from a Taga; any Brahman or Taga from a Rajput; any Brahman, Taga, or Rajput from a Jat, Gujar, or Ror. With the exception of Brahmans and Tagas, each caste will drink water from a metal vessel, if previously scoured with earth, from the same people with whom they will eat *pakkī* bread, but they will not drink from earthen vessels except with those whose *kachchhī* bread they can eat. Jats, Gujars, Rors, Rahbaris, and Ahirs eat and drink in common without any scruples. These again will eat a goldsmith's *pakkī* bread, but not in his house. A Mussulman will eat and drink from a Hindu, but no Hindu will touch either *pakkī* or *kachchhī* from any Mussulman, and will often throw it away if only a Mussulman's shadow falls upon it. Sugar and most

¹ P. 184.

sweetmeats can be eaten from almost anybody's hand, even from that of a leather-worker or sweeper ; but in this case they must be whole and not broken.' These details will, I think, suffice as an example. The reader will not only excuse me but call down blessings on my head for not aspiring to be exhaustive.

One single illustration to show to what oddities this delicate point of honour may lead. Of two much-despised castes in the Panjab, the Chuhras and the Dhanuks, it is said that they mutually refuse to eat one another's leavings, although they take those of all the other castes, with the exception of the very low-class Sansis ! We should never finish if we had to distinguish, even within the rather limited measure of facts known to us, between the rules which govern cooked rice and other foods ; between Bengal, where all castes, or nearly all, take food prepared by the Brahmans, and the more strict custom which in several castes in the rest of northern India excludes Brahman cooking and only admits that of a member of the caste itself. We need do no more than give an idea of this wearisome variety.

There remains to be indicated at least one very characteristic and general distinction, that which, in the greater part of India—in the whole of India, it is said, except in Madras ¹—separates

¹ Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, July 1890, pp. 54-5 ; cf. Nesfield, *Caste System*, pp. 26, etc.

the castes into two categories : those from whom water may be taken and those whose touch pollutes it. The categories are very variable ; for, according to Guru Proshad Sen, all the Bengalis, including the Brahmans, are in this regard, with rare exceptions, proscribed by the rest of the Hindus. The division is therefore all the more remarkable. It obviously arises from some special importance attached to water.

It is perhaps the same idea which gives rise to other strange distinctions that superstition draws between parched grain and grain cooked with water. Here is another significant example. In the Panjab the Hindus readily take pure milk from the Muslim tribe of the Ghosis ; ¹ they would reject it with horror had they any reason to fear that it had been mixed with water. It is true that causes, more or less obscure, perhaps simple, practical necessities, have in more than one case caused the rule to be relaxed. Every one in the Panjab takes water from the hands of the very low caste of Jhinvars, ² but it is a tribe which chiefly supplies domestic servants. In many villages ³ the potter may distribute water to every one—at least on condition that a special vessel is reserved for each caste. At certain village communal meals ⁴ all the castes meet

¹ Ibbetson, § 497.

³ *Bombay Gazetteer*, v. II, p. 383.

² *Ibid.*, § 617.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

together, but each eats separately. These very arrangements prove the vitality of the principle. It is closely attached to considerations of external purity.

It is by reason of similar scruples that the higher castes are obliged meticulously to avoid contact with the lower. The profession of certain castes is so despised that they are not allowed even to dwell within the village ; they are relegated to a place outside the community, despite all the services which they render to it either as servants or as craftsmen. Still more are they rigorously excluded from the communal meals at which the village assembles. There are even villages of Brahmans ¹ to which all the other castes are strictly refused admittance. It is unnecessary to add that this consideration is not of equal weight in all the castes ; it has various manifestations, but it is never absent.

A Panjabi proverb declares that a Bisnoi mounted on a camel followed by a score more will immediately throw away his food if a man of another caste happens to touch the last animal. One would expect less fuss among humbler people, yet Hunter ² gives a rather humorous account of an adventure which happened to himself. It was in Orissa ; he had hired men from several castes to carry his palanquin. Not only did the

¹ Dubois, I, pp. 134-5.

² *Orissa*, II, p. 140.

representatives of two castes refuse to associate for the purpose of working together, but each time that one caste relieved the other the palanquin had to be duly placed on the ground before the new relay would touch it. There are scarcely any Hindu families but will, if possible, consult the predictions and advice of the astrologer when grave issues arise. Nevertheless, in spite of his important functions, if he has to enter a house, great care is taken to remove the mats lest they should be polluted by his touch.

Impurity does not arise from personal contact alone ; it is communicated through the medium of objects. New distinctions occur to aggravate the case. Here is just one instance. We are in the home of a Chitpawan Brahman at Poona :

‘ The strictness of the rule that certain articles in a house may be touched and certain articles may not be touched by a middle-class or Śūdra servant complicates the arrangements in a Brahman household. A Kunbi servant cannot go to the god-room, kitchen, and dining-room of the house. He may touch bedding and woollen clothes ; he may not touch fresh homewashed cotton clothes. He may touch dry grain ; he can touch no grain that is wet. These rules are puzzling and much care is required in teaching and learning them.

Even Brahman servants are hampered by rules. When they have bathed and put on woollen, flax, or silk clothes they are pure and can touch anything. They become impure if they touch anything impure, such as bedding or such wearing apparel as a coat or a turban. If they touch a shoe or a piece of leather, they have to bathe. A schoolboy after his bath has to get a servant or a younger brother or sister to turn the pages of his leather-covered school book.' ¹



¹ *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency*, v. XVIII, part I : Poona, p. 110, note.

V. VARIOUS RULES ; RELIGION AND CASTE

WE are bordering here on another category of facts. By the side of the most general laws governing caste, which are, so to speak, essential to it and characterize and maintain its organization—the laws which fix the open limits and the barriers imposed on marriage, which protect heredity of occupation, which, by preventing too easy admixture, safeguard the individuality of each section—there exist also in each particular caste certain prohibitions and customs, some very widespread, but none universal. By their nature they are attached, directly or indirectly, to one or other of these main headings. In their entirety they constitute a little code of customs the strict observance of which, in the circle where it prevails, is maintained with uncompromising rigour. These rules have no less authority because they are less uniform in their application and less serious in their consequences. They unite to endow the various castes with individual traits. It is therefore fitting to acquire at least some idea of them.

It is natural enough that persons forbidden to

eat in common should also be forbidden to smoke together out of the same *hukka*. It is natural also that this prohibition should not be put on the same plane as the first. It happens then that intercourse is avoided in both cases with regard to the same castes or sub-castes ; on the other hand, tolerance is more frequent in the second case than in the first. The use of the same bowl, if it is made of metal, is, for instance, considered permissible provided that there are two pipe-stems. But there exists a very lively fear of this pollution : in certain regions in order to avoid awkward confusions, pipes, since they are often left in fields or in places of assembly, have some mark of identification on the stem—a blue rag for a Muslim, red for a Hindu, a bit of leather for a Chamar, a cord for a sweeper, etc.¹ It is evident that this care is observed everywhere ; it is kept up even among the castes who might have escaped it by their common debasement.

Similarly, the precautions taken against food which may have been polluted by impure contact are completed by restrictions concerning the food itself. Every one knows the veneration in which Hindus hold the cow and their horror when they see its flesh eaten. Respect for all animal life is a trait which runs through the whole of India's past. Buddhism and Jainism have developed it

¹ Ibbetson, §§ 358, 650.

to extreme limits, and Brahmanism without being equally categorical is also deeply imbued with it. With the Buddhists as with the Hindus the use of spirituous liquors is likewise severely disapproved ; it is regarded as a serious offence. It is evident also, both from certain persistent customs and from authorized texts, that certain foods are, although the reason escapes us, the objects of special disapproval : ¹ for example, onions, garlic, and mushrooms. But there is frequent disagreement between local usages, and the same book often presents conflicting passages which obscure the true facts. Ancient practices have been and are still daily impaired by the effects of foreign example.² Any general assertion, therefore, is dangerous. Who would dare to say that modern Brahmans, even of high caste, abstain from meat, even with the exception authorized by the rule in favour of meats used in sacrifices or served at funeral feasts ? We are assured that even now the use of fermented liquor forms a line of demarcation between the high and the low castes. How are we to know exactly where the dividing line is drawn in each region ?

The truth is that each caste—that is to say, each endogamous group—observes in this respect rules which, though not absolutely immutable,

¹ Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, April 1890, p. 335.

² Nesfield, § 60.

form part of the common heritage and are strictly observed so long as they are generally in force. They are sometimes very special, as in that very minute caste the Halalkhors at Poona, who, in spite of a life anything but luxurious, refuse the flesh of the hare, since its patron, Lāl Beg, is reputed to have been suckled by a hare.¹

It is of little interest here to note that certain Brahmans eat meat while others abstain from it, or that certain classes allow or do not allow pork or chicken on their table. What is important to observe is that the caste as such accepts a series of prescriptions or rather of prohibitions concerning food to which, however odd they may seem to us, it attaches a high importance, and which sometimes involves severe penalties when evaded. And let it be well noted that it is not merely a question of a somewhat flimsy casuistry confined to the fastidious classes. Many tribes of an exceedingly coarse, primitive character feed without scruple upon any dead animal they may happen to come across; but the exclusion of certain wild or particularly repugnant animals will be enough to form the basis of a new caste-section whose members will look down on the others and soon proudly refuse them the *connubium*. This fact is instructive: it shows the caste to be bound concerning food by customs which

¹ *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 436.

are a part of its traditional constitution—one of the elements which strengthen its power and unity.

It is the same with divers practices which arise in the important domain of marriage, and which in a number of cases are added to the essential rules of endogamy and exogamy. It becomes more than ever impossible to enter here into the infinite detail in which the description of enormously complicated ceremonies and usages would involve us.¹

It has already been mentioned that various castes show, by the side of very severe rules of exogamy on the paternal side, a peculiar tendency in favour of alliance with a relatively near kinswoman on the maternal side.² A rarer case is that in which polygamy is punished by exclusion.³ The custom of *levirate* authorized, in the absence of male issue, the husband's brother or, in his default, a very near kinsman, to take his place after his death, or even in his lifetime, in order to give his wife an heir. This custom, curious because of its wide diffusion, is very characteristic on account of the importance laid by the ancient family constitution on the continuity through successive males of the cult of the family.⁴ It is

¹ V. N. Mandlik has assembled a certain number of facts in a special table, *Vyavahāra Mayūkha*, p. 395 et seq.

² Dubois, I, 10-11 ; V. N. Mandlik, pp. 415 et seq.

³ V. N. Mandlik, pp. 406-7.

⁴ Cf. Hearn, *Aryan Household*, pp. 102 et seq.

of great antiquity in India,¹ and survives in an attenuated form and deflected from its original significance in places where it is customary to marry the widow to her deceased husband's younger brother.² Many castes practise it in this form, but much more common among them is the absolute prohibition of second marriage for widows.

The rigorous attitude of Hinduism towards widows is well known, and we may recall the difficulty with which the British Government suppressed the barbarous custom whereby the surviving wife was condemned to follow her husband on the funeral pyre. The custom which encouraged by every means, if it did not explicitly exact, such a sacrifice could not well be indulgent towards second marriages for women. Their condemnation may not go back to primitive times, but it is undoubtedly very ancient, as is testified by literary tradition. It has taken on extraordinary authority throughout the whole of India. Certainly this prohibition is not nearly universal, but it is general in the higher castes.³ Ardently propagated, to all appearance, by the example and precept of the Brahmans, it has become a touchstone for the social status of the castes; those who practise it are alone esteemed. Its

¹ Zimmer, *Altindisches Leben*, p. 329.

² Cf. Henry Mayne, *Hindu Law and Usage*, pp. 62 et seq.; Grant, *Central Prov. Gazetteer*, pp. 276-7; V. N. Mandlik, p. 443; Lyall, *Bevar Gazetteer*, p. 188; Risley, *Ethnogr. Gloss.*, p. lxxiv.

³ H. Mayne, pp. 84-5.

abandonment by the higher castes causes them to sink in the social scale ; ¹ its adoption by the lower castes is a means of raising and of strengthening their position in the Brahmanic scheme of society.

In the opinion of the best judges this rule, if not Vedic, is of Brahmanic origin, ² and has spread gradually. Be that as it may, it is still a caste-law, in relation to which each follows the hereditary custom, reputed immemorial, of the group to which he belongs by birth.

Other peculiarities are connected with this. Divorce, for instance, illegal for the Hindu who is a faithful follower of the law, is practised, together with the second marriage of widows, in a number of inferior castes.³ On the other hand, the custom which demands child-marriages in the case of girls, often several years before married life has become possible, is regarded as a mark of social superiority. Here, again, the tradition of the caste exerts supreme pressure. A Hindu has ingeniously attempted to explain this custom as a means of ensuring the integrity of the caste. To wait for the age of awakened desire would be to run the risk that personal fancies might outweigh religious scruples.⁴

¹ Ibbetson, pp. 174-5 ; Dubois, pp. 14-15 ; V. N. Mandlik, p. 444 ; Risley, pp. lxxxii-lxxxiii onwards.

² H. Sumner Maine, *Village Communities*, pp. 53 et seq. ; H. Mayne, *Hindu Law and Usage*, pp. 82-4 ; Risley, pp. lxxxi et seq.

³ H. Mayne, pp. 84-5 ; V. N. Mandlik, p. 428, onwards.

⁴ Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, *Calcutta Review*, April 1880, p. 284.

The interest of the caste plays a more indubitable part in a case which must be referred to in passing, not so much, however, for its own sake as for the tendency which it reveals.

Strictly speaking, a man is only allowed to choose a betrothed within his caste. Undoubtedly, however, actual practice tempered by the facilities offered by polygamy has always allowed many exceptions. There lingers, in fact, a great deal of that primitive feeling in virtue of which the man, by raising his wife to his level in admitting her to his domestic cult, may enjoy a wider liberty in his choice. It is even admitted by Brahmanic theory that marriage between a woman of high caste and a man of low caste entails for their posterity a much more serious loss of caste than the inverse association. The idea of never marrying their daughters beneath them and, better still, of marrying them into a higher class, has become among many castes a tendency sufficiently well-marked and dominant to merit a special name : it has been called *hypergamy*.

Judging by reports from many quarters ¹ it is among the Kulīna Brahmans in Bengal that it has, up to now, produced the most striking consequences, so much so that for this caste at least it has become characteristic. The ardent desire

¹ Cf., for example, Nesfield, p. 18 ; Ibbetson, §§ 456, 512 ; Risley, pp. lxxxii et seq.

among the less well-born Brahmans to marry their daughters to the Kulīnas, together with the impossibility of the latter marrying theirs into a lower rank, and the ease with which they may, without suffering sensible loss of caste, take wives from the less exalted Brahmanic castes, has had the effect of producing among the Kulīnas an absolutely abnormal development of polygamy.¹ The result is a moral and social situation which has provoked most justifiable complaints. But this is an extreme case, not one of those positive rules such as I am endeavouring to unravel in my attempt to give a clear picture of this system so remote from our own customs.

It may be a matter of surprise that I have not yet dealt with the religious aspect of caste. In a type of society like that of the Hindus, in the main very primitive, the religious idea is not connected with every fact or every cog in the machine, and it is precisely one of the most outstanding characteristics of Brahmanic civilization that religious inspiration is everywhere present, and orders all its activities. Our analysis is none the less entitled to distinguish between the elements which are especially religious and those which, for all that they are under more or less remote religious influences, are dependent

¹ Ward, *View of the History, etc., of the Hindus*, I, 79 et seq. ; V. N. Mandlik, pp. 448-9, note.

on what we generally consider as the social system.

The caste as such never presents itself in a religious light. Various beliefs often rub elbows there without hostility or apparent inconvenience, and religious conversion alone in no way affects the individual's position in the caste.¹ Mixed castes are, for example, composed of Jains and Hindus. Difference of religious belief forms no obstacle to *connubium*.² Even the influence that Islam has been able to exert over the system has been gradual and indirect. In cases where dissolution has occurred, it is because certain rules of purity have been violated or endangered by contrary practices, and not in the name of a new dogma. The caste-system is regularly practised by certain non-Āryan tribes whose peculiar beliefs are but little in harmony with the theories of the degraded Brahmans who act as their priests.³

Scholars have, I think, gone too far in denying that the evolution and action of religion have had any influence upon the grouping of the castes. And yet it is evident that, generally speaking, such influence is no longer exerted, except rarely and to a slight extent.

In events which are nearly related to the religious life — marriages, funerals, etc. — the

¹ Ibbetson, § 346. ² Nesfield, § 201 ; Ibbetson, p. 130. ³ Ibid., § 295.

various castes observe a great many practices often strictly peculiar to themselves. These usages are dear to those among whom they are a tradition. They in no way involve belief and only indirectly affect the religious conscience. A description of them might be entertaining, but would throw no new light on the caste-institution. At most, like so many other indications, they would serve by their originality and diversity to show the caste to be an organism possessing in its isolation a considerable degree of independence, and enveloping itself in a complete network of small institutions which help to create and enhance its individuality in every way.

Under one form or another each celebrates in its own fashion, with a more or less meticulous ceremonial, those rites which in all countries mark the rhythm of man's career in its different stages. But there is a ceremony belonging only to certain castes, to which the others possess no equivalent, and the primitive religious significance of this is certain. It is worth consideration ; we shall be obliged to return to it later when dealing with Brahmanic teaching. I refer to ' initiation ', the *upanayana* of the Sanskrit.

Theory divides all Hindus into two great categories, Śūdras and Dvijas. The Dvijas, that is to say ' twice-born ', comprise all the members of the three high castes, to which we shall return

presently—all those who have received a sort of religious birth by this initiation, the essential point of which is investiture with the sacred thread. The three high castes no longer exist, if they ever have existed, in their theoretic condition ; but we still meet in India a multitude of people who wear, like a bandolier, slung over the left shoulder, and hanging down to the right hip, a slender thread formed of a nine-stranded cotton-string plaited in threes. They regard this badge as the most precious of their prerogatives. It denotes, in effect, that they have been duly inducted into the religious life, and that an essential ceremony has given them access to the Veda and the sacred studies ; it has endowed them with the right to participate in all the acts of worship ; and in short has made them, if I may so express it, fully practising Hindus, in much the same way that baptism operates in the case of Christians.

Investiture is commonly practised at the age of about seven, eight, or nine years. It applies only to men. Woman, always more or less a minor in the archaic organism of the family, only belongs to the religious community before marriage through her father, and after marriage through her husband, who associates her with his semi-religious character of father of the family. Investiture is therefore a very serious matter, and is

accompanied by rites and feasts which last for several days.

We are chiefly interested in the extent to which the custom has spread. Whatever it may have been formerly, the situation has certainly changed very much since ancient times. Investiture to-day should in strict justice be reserved at most for a few Brahman castes. Many others have appropriated it as the supreme consecration of their social claims. The sacred thread has been assumed not merely by all the Brahmans, even the most debased, and those least justified in priding themselves on imaginary purity of race, not only by the merchant classes who claim to be the descendants of the Vaiśyas of tradition, but, lower still, by the Kāyasths of Bengal.¹ It has even been usurped by very low classes like the Sūds of the Panjab,² whom this pretension does not preclude either from eating meat, drinking spirits, or authorizing the marriage of widows. In general, this extreme laxity is incompatible with the wearing of the thread.³ But here again we must be prepared for every possible irregularity. In the Panjab, for example, I note that one division of the rather low caste of the Kanets wears the thread, while the other does not. Wherever the usage has spread it is strictly maintained, as

¹ *Calcutta Review*, October 1880, p. 279.

² Ibbetson, § 537.

³ H. Mayne, *op. laud.*, pp. 84, 85.

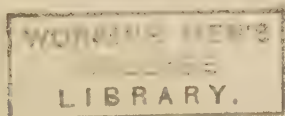
constituting one of the outstanding privileges and most jealously guarded rules.

It is the whole of these rules, often so trivial, which defines the character of each caste. Each, indeed, has a sense of cohesion to which it owes its continuance and its strength. It is sometimes personified in a special cult of some divine or legendary patron :¹ Chitragupta, the infernal recorder, for the scribes ; Lāl Guru or Lāl Beg for the sweepers² and the blacksmiths³ ; Rāja Kiḍar for certain fishermen, etc. In default of such special protectors, certain divinities, although belonging to the common Pantheon, are preferred in the worship of this or that class. The traces of true ancestor-worship appear to be rare. Observers have rightly drawn attention to them,⁴ but have wrongly leapt to positive conclusions on the subject. For in those cases where our information is at all circumstantial we find that almost all the castes have memories or legends⁵ concerning their origin and migrations, which imply that each possesses a sense of its genealogical cohesion as definite as would be revealed by the invention of some common eponym. This eponym itself is not always lacking.⁶

¹ Nesfield, §§ 101, 162. ² Ibid., § 94. ³ Ibid., § 162. ⁴ Ibid., § 101.

⁵ A number of examples will be found in the *Poona Gazetteer*.

⁶ Cf. Sans Mal, the founder of the Sansi caste ; Ibbetson, § 216.



VI. ORGANIZATION AND JURISDICTION

HOWEVER strong the blood-bond may be within the caste, it is the corporate organization and recognized jurisdiction which manifest and guarantee its perpetuity.

Beames ¹ has related an occurrence of which he was a witness which puts us into close touch with the attributes and mechanism of this organization. It deserves to be briefly quoted. It was at Purneah ; a man of low caste, a *dhobī*, or washerman, was suspected of having illicit intercourse with one of his aunts. He denied it, but refused to banish from his house the supposed accomplice. He ended by openly marrying her. None of his caste consented to be present at the marriage and public feeling ran very high against the couple. Finally all the members of the caste living in the district, several hundred in number, assembled and elected a large jury, which, after careful examination of the facts, brought in a verdict of guilty against the accused parties and ordered their exclusion. A circular duly signed by the judges, and passed from hand to hand, informed every one in the neighbouring districts who

¹ Acc. to Elliot, I, 281-2.

belonged to the caste that such-and-such a person, having been convicted of immoral conduct contrary to hereditary practices, had been deprived of all his rights, and that, in consequence, no one might eat, drink, or smoke with him, under penalty of sharing his fate. The unhappy victim, having endured the effects of the sentence for some weeks, soon found life intolerable. After a short time he gave in and separated from his wife. He was obliged, by way of expiation and fine, to give a great feast, at which the whole brotherhood ate with him, and from that time onward he was reinstated in his rights.

This organization, be it understood, is regulated by custom alone ; it is, therefore, subject to all the uncertainties and incoherences of those institutions which time, circumstances, even casual caprice may modify, without being held in check by any strictly legal restraints. Its essential elements seldom vary ; they are those which governed the organization of that wider family, the clan. In India they are to be met with not only in the caste, they are found also in the constitution of the village with or without common property. Even such distant observers as ourselves can see that its machinery, side by side with that of the caste, gives rise to considerable confusion.

The two stable elements are the Chief and the

Council, or *Panchayat*. There are, it is true, certain castes which we are told have no chief, for example, the Kachis of Poona.¹ This is undoubtedly a very rare exception, which would confirm what is in any case apparent, that the principal authority is vested in the representative council of the caste. In reality it resides in the caste as a whole, and this rudimentary constitution is singularly democratic. If we seek an example of jurisdiction directly exercised and of penalties inflicted *proprio motu* by a chief or his representative, we shall find it in a caste of Jainas, essentially ecclesiastic, the chief of which is a veritable Guru, the superior of a religious fraternity rather than the chief of a caste.² I, for my part, have difficulty in believing what Elliot reports : without making any positive statement, he asserts of the chiefs of the Banjara caste that their authority has never been strong enough to inflict capital punishment.

These chiefs receive, according to class and region, a great variety of titles : Mihtār, Chaudhrī, Nāik, Paṭel, Parganāit, Sardār,³ etc. The office

¹ *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 284.

² Steele, *Hindoo Castes*, p. 102. In this respect we may compare the jurisdiction exercised over the Brahmans in one district by certain Brahmans, heads of Maths or monastic colleges, or *Dharmādhikārins*, juris-consults, treated with spécial respect (Steele, pp. 88-90).

³ Steele gives the most invaluable information about them and about the internal functioning of the castes in the Deccan. I refer to his book once for all.

is generally hereditary, and, except in a case of forfeiture which justifies deprivation and a new choice, is handed down in the same family. The caste hardly ever intervenes in an election, except in default of an heir. The area over which the chief exercises his authority varies. As a rule, on account of the dispersion of the majority of the castes, it can extend only to a larger or smaller section of any one of them ; naturally it does not exclude plenary assemblies in times of crisis.

The chief enjoys honorific privileges, in which his wife is associated, and material advantages, such as presents, a share of certain revenues, and exemption from certain taxes. In his province he presides at all festivities—at those which accompany marriages or follow funerals, and those concerning the village temple. The perquisites attached to the office result in the fact that in some castes at least it can be sold or pledged. The chief's functions have a touch of the patriarchal ; he calls together and presides over the caste, arranges marriages and acts as arbiter to settle litigious cases. In certain merchant-classes we see him acting as intermediary and guarantor in business.¹ His dignity is also protected against any disobedience or lack of respect by the *Panchayat* which assists him.

¹ Elliot, loc. laud.

He is in fact always surrounded by a council of elders consisting of the most highly esteemed representatives of the caste.

This council is not necessarily permanent ; it can, according to circumstances, be specially appointed in view of any special affair. Whatever right of action it may have or be specially granted in certain cases of marriage and divorce,¹ it seems that its authority is rarely decisive. The last word is with the caste-assemblies.

The extent of these varies in accordance with circumstances, but they appear in general to act as representing the whole caste and invested with its plenary authority. Called together by the chief, spontaneously or on the invitation of several members, they alone are qualified to make decisions in collaboration with him in grave cases—such as temporary or absolute exclusion and disputed points of common law. All the men old enough to conduct their own affairs are summoned to it. The right to be represented by proxy in the discussion and in the vote is not admitted everywhere. Questions are decided finally by the majority of votes ; but, for want of an effective power of coercion, it happens that parties more or less equal in numbers come to a deadlock, thus holding the point at issue in suspense.

¹ Atkinson, *North-Western Provinces Gazetteer*, quoted by V. N. Mandlik, p. 454.

How indeterminate is this minor parliamentary power may be imagined without my labouring the point. It will be sufficient if we glance at its main outlines. We recognize in it the principal characteristics which reappear at all sorts of points in the life of tribes which have not yet attained to a real political organization. And we shall not be surprised that analogous assemblies and usages exist among the non-Āryan nomad peoples and among the castes which are included in the Brahmanic system.¹

The interesting point is the competence of the caste ; it is from this angle that we may expect the most instructive information about the true character of the institution. It is at once civil, domestic, and judicial.

The caste intervenes on the majority of solemn occasions, which, in our view, concern family life alone. I am speaking only of solemn festivals which bring the caste, or at any rate its chief representatives, together on occasion of births²—sometimes even at a certain period of pregnancy—weddings, and funerals.³ These gatherings are not, however, so trivial as they may appear ; they must not be regarded as ordinary diversions attended voluntarily ; indeed, in certain classes we are assured that their omission entails even

¹ Ibbetson, § 587.

² E.g. *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 187, 277. ³ *Ibid.*, I, 382, 393, 428, etc.

exclusion from the caste.¹ But I am thinking especially of the intervention of the caste in marriages ; its authority in this matter is practically uncontested.² It manifests itself in several singular customs. Among the Ghisadis,³ for example, the father of a marriageable son gathers his caste-companions together for the purpose of finding him a wife, and among the Kanoji Brahmans of Poona,⁴ an assembly of the caste arranges the marriages of its people. Where divorce and second marriage are allowed it is with the assent and sanction of the caste,⁵ despite the efforts of English judges to-day to limit its power on this head.⁶ Its role in the procedure of adoption is perfectly natural and logically indicated. In fact, the caste's consent to adoption is generally considered necessary. Not only does it sometimes intervene to facilitate it, but an adoption of which it has not been duly informed is generally regarded as null and void. Still more necessary is its consent in the case of adoption by a childless widow.⁷ In all such cases the caste associates itself with the relatives, whose presence is necessary in token of acquiescence. In this light it appears strictly as an extension of the family ; it typifies the

¹ ' Among the Sonārs of Poona ', *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 374.

² V. N. Mandlik, p. 409.

³ *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 335.

⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 169. ⁵ V. N. Mandlik, pp. 428, 434, 454 ; Steele, p. 170.

⁶ J. S. Siromani, *Commentary on Hindu Law*, p. 184.

⁷ Steele, p. 184 et seq., *passim*.

general family-council. By this right also, if need be, it makes the necessary arrangements for the guardianship of orphans; in default of relations this guardianship devolves upon the chief.¹

It is also a veritable court of justice. Cases are cited in which it has passed sentence of death.² They are already ancient history, and to-day, under the English Government, such a thing would never again be possible. But theoretically its jurisdiction extends to real crimes; the murder of a Brahman, of a woman, or of a child are among the heinous sins into which the caste would have a right to make inquiry.³ In actual fact its power is exercised much less on crimes or breaches of common law than on the rules peculiar to the caste. These rules appear to us both meticulous and trivial, but their strict maintenance is very important to the caste and equally absorbing to consciences held captive for so long in this network of exacting observance. It is a jurisdiction of manners and usages. It takes care that customs are faithfully observed, and punishes infractions which come to its notice. In its domain it is supreme; the decisions, favourable or otherwise, of the civil magistrates disturb it but little.⁴

¹ Steele, p. 191.

² Dubois, I., 34-5.

³ Steele, p. 150.

⁴ Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, *Calcutta Review*, October 1880, p. 282.

It would be difficult to draw up even an approximate list of the offences against which the judicial procedure of the caste is exercised. Even those common to all—the use of certain foods regarded as impure, intercourse with castes whose contact involves pollution, above all, meals taken in common with them—are open, according to the case, to a multitude of distinctions, none of which is without importance. The use of fermented liquors is not everywhere prohibited nor punished to the same extent. Adultery is proceeded against, but it is, in the case of a woman, viewed in a very different light, according as the accomplice is a man of high or low caste.¹ Other cases are more particularly associated with certain groups ; there are some where prostitution entails punishment, since it is not looked upon as the normal profession of the caste. To neglect the funeral of a relative and to kill a cow are, on the contrary, offences so grave that almost everywhere they call forth the utmost rigour of the law. On the other hand, only a certain number of the castes are so strict as to punish the man who has been guilty of failing to marry a daughter before the age of puberty,² or of neglecting, beyond a certain date, the initiation of his son and the investiture with the sacred thread.³

This jurisdiction is based solely on custom, and

¹ Steele, pp. 173-4.

² Ibid., pp. 163-4.

³ V. N. Mandlik.

is necessarily thwarted by the rival action of laws administered by the territorial power, however weak it may be ; it is split up amongst a number of unequal and independent bodies which are sometimes hostile to one another. It cannot be wondered at, then, that such a jurisdiction is capricious. Moreover, in our own time, under the strong hand of British administration, these tribunals are losing their hold, like many of the ideas and prejudices on which their authority is based. This is not, however, a post-mortem that we are conducting : the institution is falling into decay, but its motive-force is not broken : it still works, although slowly and irregularly.

We must add that we have only vague information as to detail. For a man to lay his own hand to the plough or to cultivate vegetables is, for example, throughout the high castes, considered to entail derogation. Can such offences as these, in certain groups, be made the subject of formal condemnation ? I think so, but I would not venture to affirm it. What is clear is that the punishment of the caste falls essentially upon irregularities which, bearing either on questions of marriage and heredity, on observances of purity, or on customs peculiar to the group, directly affect its reputation.

In such cases the caste in its decisions employs graduated methods of repression. It imposes

finer, generally not very heavy and assessed in proportion to the means of the persons, as is fitting in a rather poor country. The proceeds are applied either to some charity or to communal festivities.¹ Among its characteristic sentences are the performance of purificatory penances, the provision of repasts to which the condemned must invite the caste, and finally and above all, absolute or temporary expulsion. The punishment varies not only, as one would expect, with the offence, but also according to custom with the degree of their humiliation. The caprice of the judges and certain personal considerations are allowed more or less openly to play their part. A certain case will in one place entail perpetual expulsion, whereas in another it will seem adequately punished by a mild penance. The available information is not consistent.

Irrevocable expulsion is, I think, becoming more and more rare. Even for very serious offences it can scarcely ever be maintained against people who have some influence over their fellows or sufficient resources wherewith to disarm their severity. It is resorted to chiefly in cases where there is a question of punishing prolonged intercourse with despised and impure classes, or real crimes.

It is, as a matter of fact, a much more dreadful

¹ E.g., 'among the Vānis', *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 277.

punishment than would at first appear. As the Abbé Dubois ¹ says :

‘ This expulsion from the caste, which occurs in cases of breach of customary usage or of some public offence which would dishonour the whole caste if it remained unpunished, is a kind of civil excommunication, which deprives the person who has the misfortune to incur it of all intercourse with his fellows. It renders him, so to speak, dead to the world. . . . With the loss of caste, he loses not only his relations and friends, but sometimes even his wife and children, who prefer to abandon him entirely rather than share his ill-fortune. No one dare eat with him nor even offer him a drop of water. . . . He must expect wherever he is recognized, to be avoided, pointed at with the finger of scorn, and looked upon as a reprobate. . . . A mere Śūdra, provided he has some trace of honour and scrupulousness, would never join company nor even communicate with a Brahman thus degraded.’

The ceremonial of expulsion is significant : the funeral ² of the guilty person is conducted in due form ; it is indeed civil death, with all its consequences. If it be a man who is expelled, his wife

¹ *Mœurs*, I, 36.

² For actual rites, see, e.g., Steele, p. 173.

and children can only remain pure and keep their place in the caste by abandoning the outlaw, and he is disqualified from inheriting¹ and adopting.² This is perfectly natural, since the children even who are born to him after his eviction share his fate ; they cannot be reinstated unless they leave their father and also submit to a penance.

The penances are serious ; they may take the form of a pilgrimage to some renowned temple, immersion in the Ganges, or a mere fast. The guilty person may be condemned to have his moustache shaved off, to be branded, or to have his tongue burnt ; or else he may have to swallow the beverage called *pañchagavya*, which is supposed to have purifying powers, but which sounds very disgusting, being a mixture of the five products of the cow—milk, whey, butter, and the rest. In any case he must humble himself before the assembled caste and offer public evidence of his docility and repentance.³ Above all, he must offer to his caste a repast, of which he bears the expense.

We should be doing the Hindus an injustice were we to attribute to their instincts of sociability alone the importance which they attach to this kind of banquet. The desire to indulge in noisy collective rejoicings, a taste which has often been

¹ Although the rule is perhaps not absolute (Steele, p. 155), and, above all, is no longer recognized by English law.

² Steele, p. 183.

³ Ibid., p. 150 ; Dubois, I, 41 et seq.

noticed even in those who have least ease and pleasure in their daily lives, may well have made this penalty more frequent, but it certainly has a more serious and justifiable origin. If exclusion from the common meal is one of the most apparent and inevitable results of degradation, the admission of the rehabilitated culprit to the table of his fellows must be the public consecration of his reinstatement. The two cases are converse but complementary; both spring from the same source, which will be dealt with later, and, let it be said at once, from loftier considerations than a hasty judgement would at first be inclined to admit.

I have spoken up to now as if this private justice were exercised solely by the caste itself or by its authorized representatives, in the name of its traditional usages. The facts, indeed, point to this conclusion; but these customs have been incorporated in the religious code of Brahmanism and are applied in the name of a religious authority which finds its power, if not its origin, in written tradition. Thus it happens that a Brahman often directs the procedure; the caste or its council makes its decisions with the help of his learning and intelligence. Sometimes even the Brahman appears to act alone; in fact, a more or less tacit delegation takes place.

VII. DISINTEGRATION AND MULTIPLICATION OF CASTES

FROM the beginning I have put the reader on his guard against the common illusion of regarding caste-organization as a permanent structure divided up into watertight compartments, as a system whose harmonious and reasoned practice is upheld by its claim to immutability. I must return to this aspect of the subject. A sketch of its fixed characteristics would run the risk of giving wrong impressions, if we did not see in action some, at any rate, of the agents which bring variety, mobility, and life into this vast organism. It is incessantly stirred and modified by the leaven of reform; the hierarchical principle which pervades it tends to conservatism and stability. These are the two great conflicting currents of influence.

All those who have observed Hindu society at close range are agreed in noting the existence of a constant stir and change in the composition, rank, and occupations of the castes. One of the most farseeing goes so far as to declare that if descent constituted a presumption in favour of the claims of the following generation, it is mere

presumption modified or weakened by an infinite number of circumstances.¹ It is impossible to open any of the documents which are accessible to us without coming across a multitude of facts and affirmations, which show us in this world of neighbouring and overlapping corporate bodies a continued movement of disintegration and reconstitution.

The large castes with a generic name—the Brahmans, the Rajputs, the Jats—are, properly speaking, only collections of castes ; the real unity is in the subdivisions, sub-castes, clans, or whatever one may choose to call them. I have already said this, and it is important to bear it in mind. The name of Rajput is only an honorific title, the unity of which embraces a multitude of tribes and castes, differing in origin, profession, and custom. The Jats of the Panjab are, beyond all doubt, a mixture of exceedingly diverse populations, and the Jat is not far wrong when, questioned as to his caste, he gives the name of a clan which is his true corporative homeland.²

Even these sections are subdivided and their names diversified. Thus it is that, among the Brahman, Vaidya, and Kāyasth castes in Bengal little groups called *dals*, *samājas*, sometimes *melās*, are formed, which soon close for their members the horizon of the caste, whether it be mere

¹ Ibbetson, p. 172.

² Ibid., p. 427.

proximity which has first brought them together or whether they are distinguished by some usages which a man of exceptional influence has induced them to adopt.¹ It is in these same little groups that there exists the element of innovation, through the medium of which, thanks to the gradual infiltration of new practices, a more general change of ideas and habits may be developed. Meanwhile the first result is to multiply the subdivisions and castes. Sections are formed which are very small in numbers; the admission of modifications of every kind is more free because the agreement of a small group is sufficient to institute them. A particular usage can give birth to a new caste, but there are other factors also.

First, geographical distribution. It is by reason of their dispersion that the Jainas of Northern India have formed six castes, which are distinguished by no occupational speciality.² Migration invariably transforms into a special caste the sect which has broken away from its original body. The fact is particularly apparent among the Brahmans, who have preserved unusually precise memories of their origins; but it holds good in every degree of the scale.³

Religion is involved also. Although the caste

¹ Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, April 1890, pp. 335, 339-41; Nil Kant Chatterjee, *ibid.*, July 1891, pp. 129 et seq.

² Nesfield, §§ 199, 200.

³ Cf., e.g., Ibbetson, § 343.

may have succeeded in resisting the hostile influence of Islam, and often imposed itself upon the followers of a creed which theoretically is by no means in sympathy with it, Islam has certainly made its influence felt, since its invasion of India, in those regions where it has established itself most firmly. Many of the professional classes in the west are divided into corresponding Hindu and Muslim tribes.¹ The difference of ideas concerning external purity alone is of a nature, if not to abolish common names, at least to weaken common ties and create real schisms. It is very probable that the warrior classes into which these ideas have penetrated have reverted in some cases to the status of mere tribes since the Muslim conquest has loosened the bonds of the caste.² The propagation of the Sikh doctrine has also contributed to the evolution of several castes. They discovered in adherence to the sect a means of raising their social status, a conclusion all the more natural since Sikhism theoretically eliminates the idea of caste. It is also noticeable that this improvement of status is always accompanied, and undoubtedly justified in part, by the abandonment of certain occupations reputed to be degrading.³ The very superstitions of the non-Āryan tribes may have exerted an influence in their own way,

¹ Ibbetson, § 619 ; Nesfield, § 98.

² Ibbetson, § 456.

³ Ibid., § 567.

if it be true, as good judges maintain,¹ that groups of priest-sorcerers have been incorporated as Brahmans. The Ojha Brahmans of the North-West Provinces, for example, amongst others, are said to be of not more distinguished origin.

In the very heart of Hinduism several castes or sub-castes owe their individuality to religious schisms. The Lingayats of the Deccan² clearly form a special class founded on their attachment to the Sivaite cult of the *lingam*. Whatever may be the particular reasons which have split them up into five castes, it is again by virtue of a religious consideration, of the sacerdotal role which has devolved upon it, that the first, that of the Jangamas, has separated and secured for itself the most important position.

From time immemorial India has swarmed with sects, and their growth is far from complete. Fresh sects spring up almost yearly, only, it is true, to be, as a rule, very rapidly absorbed in the rising tide of Hinduism which is considered orthodox despite its composite character.

In general, these religious movements, narrowly circumscribed, merely give birth to a group of ascetics who are sworn to mortification and celibacy, and therefore exclude the first condition of the caste, heredity. They are recruited by voluntary

¹ Cf. Lyall, *Asiatic Studies*, pp. 175-6 and pp. 172 et seq.; Nesfield, pp. 63, 79.

² Steele, pp. 105 et seq.

affiliations, or add to their numbers children procured from other castes. But many of these fraternities, composed of both sexes, turn more or less into hereditary castes, sometimes very restricted, such as the Araḍis and the Bhāraḍis of Poona.¹ The Vairāgis are very much more numerous ; ² subdivided into several sections on the model of the true castes, they do not yet form a strictly hereditary caste. Development is more advanced among the Gosains, who, having admitted marriage, now constitute fully practising castes.³ Certain sects, like those of the Bishnoīs in the Panjab, founded in the fifteenth century by a Rajput of Bikanir, have never had either the semblance or the rule of a religious order ; they furnish a perfectly clear example of people under the domination of a common heresy abandoning their primitive group to form themselves into an autonomous body.⁴

The movements which are thus produced in the castes, and which are incessantly modifying their position, may be either individual or collective. Certain people, thanks to powerful protection or to trickery and corruption, find means to introduce themselves singly into various castes ; this happens most frequently in the frontier territories,

¹ *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 444, 446.

² Steele, pp. 109 et seq. ; cf. Guru Proshad Sen, *Calcutta Review*, July 1890, p. 59, as to their position in Bengal.

³ Nesfield, § 144.

⁴ Ibbetson, § 123.

where observance is less strict.¹ Men of every caste have been known to be made Brahmans by the caprice of a chief.² Some castes are far from strict, and will under certain conditions readily open their ranks to all comers.³ Some nomad or criminal tribes gladly accept recruits for a consideration.⁴ The characteristic changes are made, however, by more or less compact masses.

These changes follow, as one can observe, two contrary tendencies. Certain castes or sections are formed by groups raising themselves in the social scale; others, more numerous, resign themselves to a degradation imposed by circumstances. In the rules which, according to the Brahmanic system, dominate the life of the caste—rules of purity, domestic laws or religious beliefs—we discover the pivot of these movements.

Aboriginal populations, still far from civilized, gradually become Brahmanized. By slow degrees they enter the pale of Hinduism by a procedure which Lyall has skilfully disclosed.⁵ Risley,⁶ analysing in turn this evolution, distinguishes four types. A certain number of chiefs, having acquired some landed property and the importance which it entails, surround themselves with Brahmans who invent for them a genealogy and a legendary origin; or else groups of aborigines

¹ Ibbetson, §§ 422, 423.

² Elliot, I, 148; Nesfield, p. 79.

³ Cf. Nesfield, § 80, on the Banjaras.

⁴ Ibbetson, § 577.

⁵ *Asiatic Studies*, p. 103, al.

⁶ *Ethnogr. Gloss.*, pp. xv et seq.

throw themselves into the arms of some Hindu sect and discard their primitive nomenclature. Again, a whole tribe will enrol themselves under the banner of Hinduism, creating thereby a new caste; or finally, the evolution comes about slowly and is made manifest by the change of name. In all these cases this development is marked and authorized by the adoption of Hindu festivals and religious usages, the practices of purification, and the laws which govern marriage, and, above all, by the respect lavished on the Brahmans, who are recognized as priests and religious leaders of the tribe. Examples abound on all sides: the Mīnas of Central India,¹ the Bāgrīs² of the North-West Provinces, the Khaṇḍ and Santiās of Orissa,³ and numberless others. The process is always the same.⁴ These facts explain why several Rajput clans bear the name of non-Āryan tribes; there can be no doubt that they belong to them by birth.⁵ It would be no more surprising to discover that many Rajputs of the Panjab were drawn from the debris of several clans or castes as their accession to landed property gradually conferred on them a growing social importance and coloured their ambition.⁶

¹ Hearn, *Aryan Household*, pp. 301, 306.

² Elliot, I, p. 9.

³ N. K. Bose, *Calcutta Review*, July 1891, p. 110.

⁴ Ibbetson, §§ 545-7; Nesfield, §§ 118-20. ⁵ Nesfield, pp. 16-18.

⁶ Ibbetson, § 339.

The same thing happens in the case of castes which have existed for a long time within the Hindu community. An Ahiri clan, contemptuous of its former associates, forms itself into a special caste by introducing a few reforms, such as condemning women to regular seclusion and abolishing second marriages for widows ; ¹ the Chamars, who abandon the degrading occupation of leathercraft for weaving, become Julaha Chamars, pending the time when they may be considered Julahas by full right. Some Chuhras who give up the occupation of sweepers are transformed into Murallis. There are innumerable other instances.

The converse process is still more frequent. The illegitimate children of the Karana caste in Orissa have formed themselves into a special group.² In the same province a caste of Chattarkhais has been recruited from all sorts of people who have lost their social status by being fed in 'relief-kitchens' during the last famine. It has even been rapidly subdivided into two sections according to the former rank of the new-comers.³ Whilst preserving their title and the use of the sacred thread, the Brahmans themselves, who officiate for the despised classes, fall into disrepute which isolates them strictly from their fellows. The handling of the plough is not less fatal to

¹ *Calcutta Review*, July 1891, p. 109.

² Ibbetson, § 441 ; cf. also Atkinson in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1884, p. 44.

³ Risley, p. viii.

them. We see among the Thāvīs, the Dhūnsars, and the Dharūkrā, Brahmans ¹ who, by breaking these and other laws, have not long since given up the right even to the title which formerly secured to them a remnant of superiority and respect. Although they lay claim to a Brahmanic origin, seclude their women, and wear the thread, the Tagas in the Panjab are no more than a criminal caste of robbers.² It can be imagined that the same degradation occurs still more easily in the humbler castes—Rajputs, Banias, and others. It is useless to add to the list.

By the factors which modify the condition of the groups we may judge of the principal considerations which govern their hierarchy. This hierarchy is very punctilious, but far from being invariable. The general tendencies are altered by special circumstances, especially by historical events. At a given moment the power of a province may have fallen to the representative of a class which from its origin did not seem destined to wield authority. The agrarian race of the Kunbis at Poona go so far as to adorn themselves with the title of Kshatriyas. This claim is not unconnected with the important part played in the seventeenth century by one of its members, Śivājī, as founder of the Maratha power.³ All

¹ Ibbetson, §§ 423, 534, 586.

² Ibid., §§ 282-3.

³ *Poona Gazetteer*, I, 284-5.

things considered, what governs precedence is the degree of fidelity with which each caste conforms, or professes to conform, to the Brahmanic teaching either as regards marriage or external purity, or as regards the occupations or accessory customs of which I have attempted to give some idea. It is, above all, the supposed impurity of their trades or of their food which is responsible for the humiliation of the lowest castes, those who are commonly called *outcasts*.¹ It is easy to imagine that every one is scrupulously on his guard against these people, since the essential formula is to have no dealings with those who are inferior and defiled.

It is characteristic of the highflown vanity of the various groups that they set particular store on establishing completely imaginary connexions with castes like the Kshatriya and the Vaiśya of the Brahmanic system, which have no reality, at least in our own times. It cannot therefore be prompted by any genuine tradition; it is out of date, and inspired, like the whole hierarchical scheme, by the sacerdotal theory.

It is not astonishing, then, that the whole ordinance is crowned by the supremacy which it assures to the Brahmans. All their privileges and the often extravagant respect with which they are treated have been often described.² It is not an

¹ Ibbetson, p. 153.

² It suffices to refer to the Abbé Dubois.

exaggeration to say that the domination and prestige of the Brahman caste are the most incontestable characteristics of Hinduism.¹ This tendency is so strong that a caste such as might arouse much prejudice and contempt may, in spite of all this, be treated with lasting esteem for the sole reason that it displays superior fidelity to Brahmanic practices.² However low certain groups may be, however much their company may contaminate the Brahmans who consent to officiate for them, the mere circumstance of their assistance is enough to make the caste vastly superior to those who do not enjoy the Brahmans' administrations. The mere name of Brahman is a very eminent title. The very sections that the Brahmans of good stock despise the most, such as the Josis of the North-West Provinces,³ are, for the reason that they are Brahmans, profoundly revered by the great mass of the population.

This aspect of the 'gods of the earth' is not bound up solely with their religious character.⁴ It extends to those representatives of the class whose occupations and ordinary life would of

¹ Ibbetson, pp. 111-12; exceptions, as well as being very rare, are generally based on some definite motive. The case of those Santals of Bengal who, at the time of the famine, preferred to die of hunger rather than touch food prepared by Brahmans is a piquant reaction of the scruples fostered by orthodox teaching.

² Ibbetson, § 532.

³ Nesfield, p. 68.

⁴ Ibbetson, pp. 108, 112, 131. It is by virtue of the same tendency that the Jainas adorn themselves with the sacred thread which places them amongst the Dvijas (Dubois, I, p. 15).

themselves afford no title to it. Respect which is properly religious is lavished on all kinds of ascetics and teachers, of whom a very large number are not Brahmans. Conversely, sects whose heterodox belief should easily detach them from the Brahmans and the prejudices of caste, like the Jainas,¹ and even some Muslims, continue to show a most abject deference to them, and to desire them as priests of their cult. Still less does the Brahmanic prerogative descend to the level of the sectarian conflicts between Vishnuites and Śivaïtes. The Brahmans are generally pleased to affect an attitude of disdain towards these divisions.

Looking down on so many conflicting issues, it is not easy for the untrained observer to adapt himself quickly to those spontaneous readjustments which every bird's-eye view demands. This sketch is fated to get out of date rapidly ; perhaps the situation which it summarizes has recently suffered more than one assault. However powerful may be the force of conservatism and inertia peculiar to the East, traditional organization is attacked by Western influence and by the ideas and habits which it favours. In choosing its many assistants the Anglo-Indian Government pays no attention to caste nor to its prejudices, but is guided solely by personal merit. Army and

¹ Ibbetson, p. 112.

administration throw people of all classes together in an intimacy which would once have appeared intolerable. Custom has been successfully assailed both by thought and deed.

Notwithstanding their haughty contempt for the barbarians, the Mlechchhas, whom theoretically they regard as veritable *outcasts*, it is difficult for the Hindus not to feel some admiration and fear for their powerful masters, which gives these so-called Pariahs a singular prestige. Relations of every sort with these barbarians so greatly superior in civilization are not only frequent, but even appear honourable and flattering. The vanity of imitation incessantly undermines traditional instinct and its scruples. Meat finds its way on to the table of many Brahmans ; pollution contracted by a voyage overseas and by the infractions which it entails is no longer regarded as calamitous. On every side rules are relaxing, custom is weakened, and gradually from one small group to another the movement of evolution is discerned. Caste jurisdiction necessarily gives way before the strong and regular administration of England ; it loses at once in extent, in precision, and in authority.

This decay is attested on all sides. One must not over-estimate the ground already won ; but the tendency and its future consequences cannot be mistaken. Now is the time to study caste if

we wish to catch it alive and in action. Doubtless this infiltration and imitation of European ideas is extremely superficial ; it has not yet penetrated very far into the lower strata of this immense and tenacious population. But once the high castes are shaken they may rapidly bring down the system. The prestige of the Brahmanic class is the corner-stone of the whole organization. It is there that the complexity attains to some sort of unity ; this disconcerting confusion is to some extent brought into line by the Brahmanic observances which it accepts and by the Brahmanic domination which it sanctions.

What does this mean ? Is this unity primitive ? Is the Brahmanic organization of the castes at the very root of the system, or does it only mark its most recent form ?

The question is of vital importance. The lengthy details into which I have entered must be excused, since they are designed to prepare the ground for its examination.



PART II

THE PAST

Introductory. I. The Brahmanic system of Castes : the Dharmaśāstras and the Epic. II. The Brāhmaṇas and the Vedic Hymns. III. Character and Origin of the System : Classes and Castes. IV. Origins according to Legend : Rivalries between Priests and Nobles

INTRODUCTORY

THE past history of caste is only intelligible in the light of present conditions, as we shall shortly see, for I am anxious to face two problems with which we are confronted, namely, what was the early condition of the Hindu castes in historic times? and what are the beginnings of the institution, if these can be traced back through those obscurities which envelop all origins?

I. THE BRAHMANIC SYSTEM OF CASTES : THE DHARMAŚĀSTRAS AND THE EPIC

WE must then, first of all, ascertain in what light the castes are presented to us by tradition ; having observed them in practice, let us see what the literary documents have to say. I do not intend to give here more than a very summary idea of this past, for successfully to define the scope and character of the evidence is a matter of some delicacy.

The social life of the Hindus is in theory regulated by books whose authorship is attributed to more or less legendary sages, Manu, Yājñavalkya, Vasishṭha, and many others. The place which they accord to civil organization and to criminal repression has contributed, together with a too slavish translation of their Sanskrit title, to make them known as ' Law-books ', or, to be more exact, ' Books of the Law '—*dharmaśāstras*. We must not expect to find that they are codes, for of codes they have neither the origin, the form, nor the authority. We are in a country where the religious inspiration which presided over the early organization of societies has been less than elsewhere supplanted by the birth of a secular

government. Hindu society is regulated by religious custom, and the law-books are essentially collections of religious precepts. In the absence of a true legislation and under the ever-increasing authority of the Brahmans, they have in the course of time received a sort of official and public sanction. They have, however, only acquired this late in the day, and then not without reservations; it represents a secondary evolution of their history, and in no wise offers conclusive evidence of their primitive character.

Concurrently, the stream of epic tradition flows on. Very archaic in origin, less archaic in language, it covers a whole period still somewhat imperfectly determined but in any case vast. By its nature it clearly springs from a totally different section of the population. Nevertheless, its huge canvas comprises not only stories in a heroic and legendary vein, but also gives free scope to doctrinal teaching. It was, moreover, formed at a time when the supremacy of the Brahmans and the authority of their precepts in every human concern were irrevocably established. Epic, by its style, can be directly traced to Brahmanic influence. This is perceptible in its many resemblances, often literal, to the 'Law-books', in its copious quotations from them, and especially from the most celebrated of them, the code of Manu. Thus, although by its subject, which is national,

if not by its language, which is learned, it is addressed to the people as a whole, and although it draws its principal subject-matter from warlike legends, the Epic belongs to sacerdotal tradition. Its field is so wide and the stories so varied that some inconsistency could not fail to creep in ; but on the whole the rules laid down and the chief authority are definitely the same in both cases.

Allowing for slight divergences, we can include in a single survey, without fear of any essential incongruity, the picture which unfolds itself in these two series of documents.

The theory which emerges shows us a society divided into strictly isolated castes governed by rules very similar to those which are in force to-day. The occupations assigned to each caste are distinct and limited. Marriage is carefully regulated. Only a wife of the same caste can assist her husband in family and sacrificial rites ; she alone secures to the son a status equal to that of his father. Born of a woman of a lower caste, the son sinks to his mother's caste, and his position in the partition of the father's property is greatly weakened. At the very least the first wife must therefore be of the same caste as the man. He is, moreover, forbidden to marry either within the *gotra* of his father or among his mother's near relations. As regards food, the distinction

between foods allowed and disallowed is set forth with profuse detail; and the use of fermented liquors is condemned as one of the most inexpiable of crimes. The mere glance of a man of low caste is sufficient to pollute a meal, and it is only by exceptional authorizations that food is sometimes allowed to be received from his hands. His very gifts—frankly, I fear this rule has been strained more than once—must be rigorously refused by the Brahman. Several of the most peculiar customs are here established: the marriage of girls before puberty is enjoined, and widows are forbidden to contract a second marriage.

The extreme sentence is exclusion from the caste, but it is not as a rule without appeal: a whole code of graduated penances permit those who undergo them to re-enter their own social sphere. But the very name of the grave offences (*pātaka*—‘that which causes to fall’, and *upapātaka*) clearly asserts that their natural effect is to cause the guilty man to fall from his place in the caste assigned to him by birth.

The conformity of the data with those which can be collected by an observer at the present day is striking. There is, however, one important difference: if there is one fact which obtrudes itself in the real life of India, it is the enormous number of castes, their overlapping, and the confusion in which they are involved. In theory

there are only four castes, *varṇas*: the Brahmins, priests, and learned man; the Kshatriyas, warriors and nobles; the Vaiśyas, agriculturists and merchants; and the Śūdras, the servant-class, on whom devolve all the menial offices. The Brahmins' only duties are to study and teach the Vedas, to offer sacrifices, and to offer, and above all to receive, gifts. It is the duty of the Kshatriyas to give orders, to protect the people, to offer sacrifices through the medium of the Brahmins and to study the Vedas; the Vaiśyas must raise livestock, cultivate the soil, engage in trade, and give alms, not neglecting either the sacred rites or the study of the written word; the Śūdras have only one essential task—to serve the higher castes. Outside this system there are only barbarous or despised peoples who have no access to the religious and social life of the Brahmanic world, that is to say, foreigners or Mlechchhas.

What does this fine ordinance amount to in reality? The whole authority and the whole meaning of tradition are involved in this question.

One preliminary remark: In spite of their dogmatic tone and systematic appearance, we do not need to scan the prescriptions very closely to perceive that a meticulous pursuit of very slight details covers a great many uncertainties and deficiencies. The lofty exclusiveness of the language

hides weakness of authority and laxity of practice. This is to be seen in other places besides India. The authorizations are often uncertain and the degree of precision always low. More serious still are the contradictions which, explicit or implicit, are constantly met with from one passage to another.

The system only admits of four castes : there is no fifth, we are assured. And thus, from the mixture of these castes, considered according to the various imaginable hypotheses, new castes are brought forth, the ' mixed castes '. The degree of respect assigned to each is less in proportion as it postulates the association of a woman of higher caste with a man of lower caste. This is not all. Children, although the offspring of a couple in the same caste, may forfeit their status if the obligatory ceremonies are neglected. They form the class of the Vrātyas, but according as they derive from Brahmans, Kshatriyas or Vaiśyas, the Vrātyas divide, with a symmetry which clearly shows an artificial ordinance, into exactly the same number of distinct castes. We are given the name of all these sections and the trades which are proper to each. But these are certainly only specimens ; these mixtures and complications imply the existence of many others, and the Vishṇusmṛiti ¹ is certainly right in describing as

¹ Vishṇusmṛiti, XVI, 7.

‘ innumerable ’ the sections which originate in this manner.

How far we still are from the simple truth !

The four castes might at least appear to be isolated by their special functions, but reservations at once begin to pour in. Each of the higher castes is first of all authorized to embrace the mode of life peculiar to the caste which follows it in order of gradation. This declension is limited to cases where it is imposed by lack of means. But make no mistake : we are dealing not with an exceptional case of necessity but with perfectly ordinary facts thinly disguised, simply for the sake of the principle, by a decent pretext, by a reservation which it is hoped may survive the shipwreck of the theory. Let us run through the list of Brahmans who in theory are regarded as unworthy to be invited to funeral feasts : robbers, butchers, hirelings, actors, singers, keepers of low gaming-houses, along with other more harmless professions, figure in the list as very common species. It is evident, therefore, that at that time the ways of gaining a livelihood were as varied among the Brahmans as they are to-day.¹ Manus acted prudently in declaring that a Brahman must always be regarded as a high divinity ‘ whatever trade he may follow ’.²

¹ Hopkins, *Mutual Relations of Castes*, pp. 39, 52-3.

² *Mānava Dh. Ś.* IX, 319.

All Brahmans excluded from the model caste must, however, have been distributed as they are to-day, somewhat extensively among special castes. *Manu* seems to know nothing of them. He never breathes a word about these castes. He therefore does not pretend so to dispose the facts as to form a true picture, but confines himself to presenting the type of Brahmanic caste in its ideal integrity.

Regular marriage should only be contracted between members of the same caste. The rules, however, concerning certain marriage ceremonies and matters of inheritance, and the permission to marry, at any rate as second wives, women of lower castes—in fact, the whole theory of mixed castes—proves that the rule was not applied with such uniform severity as the general formula would lead us to suppose. The prohibition against marrying a *Sūdra*, which in the case of Brahmans and *Kshatriyas* is repeated with insistence, obviously admits of a great many accommodations. Still more so is this true of the precepts which govern food. Lastly, except for certain reservations, the use of meat itself is tolerated. Abstinence from spirits, which is strongly enjoined elsewhere, appears in certain passages as nothing but a mere counsel of perfection.

Despite the divine authority behind which it shelters, tradition is not inviolable. Its formulae appear to be absolute, but in a dozen places it

warns us that the true rule resides in custom, that it is the usage proper to each region and caste which is law. It is in accordance with this usage that a king who is careful of his duty must regulate his acts and decrees.¹ To a great extent this is still true to-day. It is a trait which characterizes the whole past of India, and on which the most experienced authorities have rightly insisted.² There are texts which show that lofty descent is most easily recognized by purity of conduct—to such a degree has the intermixture of castes obscured all lineal descent.³ Others ascribe to an earlier and more perfect terrestrial age the time when the ordinance of castes was strictly maintained,⁴ thus recognizing that the rules of theory are in fact strangely elastic.

As was to be expected, the same impression emerges from the Epic. The discrepancies here are of precisely the same nature as in the law-books. Some of them are interesting ; but what strikes us most forcibly is the number of cases in the epic stories where facts are in contradiction to doctrine. We have been prepared for the strict distinction of all professions, and yet all castes take part in an armed conflict.⁵ Droṇa, although

¹ *Mānava Dh.*, VIII, 41.

² V. N. Mandlik, *op. laud.*, p. 438.

³ *Mahābhār.*, Vanap. 12481, Śāntip, 2440 ; cited by Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, 134, 484.

⁴ *Mahābhār.*, Vanap. 11240, ap. Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, 143.

⁵ Cf. Hopkins in the *Journ. Amer. Orient. Soc.*, XIII, p. 220.

a Brahman, is one of the chief heroes of the struggle, and, although the son of a shepherd, Karna is one of the most celebrated military leaders. The prestige of Yajatra and Vidura does not suffer although they are descended from a Sūdra.¹ Alliances between Kshatriyas and Brahmans, even between these high personages and the lowest castes, are frequent.² We scarcely find any traces of general religious education for young nobles, although this is enjoined by law;³ still less do we see abstinence from meat or liquor observed by warriors.⁴ And yet the rule is known. More than once the theoretic condemnation is given a prominent place in the same story that bears witness to its violation.⁵ After this, it is not surprising to meet with kings of any and every caste,⁶ when Manu himself admits the possibility of a Sūdra enjoying kingly power.⁷

The Epic is by its nature so closely connected with the nobility that it tends to attribute to kings the supremacy which is claimed by the law-books for the Brahmans.⁸ It is none the less explicit at times concerning the incomparable grandeur of the sacerdotal class.⁹ Take the story of Maṇḍa. He thinks himself the son of a

¹ Ibid., p. 95.

² Ibid., p. 344.

³ Ibid., p. 109.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 119, 120.

⁵ Ibid., p. 120, 352-3.

⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

⁷ *Mānava Dh. Ś.*, IV, p. 61.

⁸ Hopkins, loc. cit., p. 73.

⁹ See the passages cited by Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, p. 120 et seq.

Brahman ; as a matter of fact, he is a child of sin, his father having been a Śūdra ; he is in reality only a miserable *outcast*. Informed of his shame by a miracle, he attempts to regain his lost dignity by undergoing great hardships. For centuries he labours in vain ; for the space of a hundred years he piously balances himself on one foot, but without avail. Indra on his throne is moved and hastens to him ; he lavishes on him the most desirable gifts and promises him exceptional favours. But the one which the penitent solicits is impossible ! Thousands and millions of successive births are necessary to obtain the ascent from a lower to a higher caste. Rāma does not hesitate to cut off the head of a young Śūdra whose sole crime is to indulge in religious rites which are in theory forbidden to his caste.¹ Insolence such as this threatens to upset the whole equilibrium of public order, so essential is the maintenance of the prerogatives which belong exclusively to the various castes.

Our main object being to re-establish historical sequence, we are at first disposed to accept these early testimonies regarding the social state of India as the complete and sincere expression of the actual conditions. Are we entitled to do so in the circumstances ? Both in epic tradition and in sacerdotal teaching the system is identical ;

¹ See passages cited by Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, pp. 118–20.

but in both it is equally riddled with uncertainties and contradictions, which are tantamount to confessions of failure. Everything reveals the system as artificial and speculative. The facts have no legal basis. At every turn they give the lie to the system—by contradicting it or failing to coincide with it. The system does not even lay claim to be authoritative, since it clearly recognizes the stronger claims of custom. It is, in a word, nothing more than the focusing of an existing situation whose incoherences and complications it sets out to reconcile in an attempt to bring the whole into conformity with an ideal type.

The explanation of mixed castes can never have deceived any one ; ¹ flagrant impossibilities condemn it at sight.

In the presence of a number of groups whose multiplicity completely destroyed the exclusive principle of the four castes it became necessary to justify their existence, and the idea was conceived of deriving them from the very principle which they invalidated. The system itself could logically serve but once to explain the first origin of these groups. Also the number of sections which it was possible to explain in this way was certainly inadequate ; the geographical names that many of them bore gave the lie at once to the genesis attributed to them. This was of little moment ;

¹ Cf. Max Müller, *Chips*, II, p. 343.

the Hindu mind, once drunk with classifications, is not likely to stick at scruples such as these.

Actuality, moreover, lent colour to this attempt. There was the case, doubtless often noticed, where the local grouping of people excluded from the paternal caste by their irregular birth and relegated to a lower rung of the social ladder, gave rise to a new subdivision. On this basis, with the deceptive mental discipline of the Hindu mind, more than dubious hypotheses were converted into positive assertions. They offered a twofold advantage: that of creating an appearance of symmetry, which is irresistibly attractive to Indian theorists, and that of eliminating from the principle laid down as the root of the social organization the very confusion which seemed likely to compromise it.

The propensity was so strong that it manifested itself in several ways. Is it not Manu himself¹ who represents as Kshatriyas reduced to the condition of Śūdras by diverse offences—omission of rites and contempt for Brahmans—the tribes of the Pauṇḍrakas, Choḍas, Drāviḍas, Kāmbojas, Yavanas, Śākas, Pāradas, Pahlavas, Cīnas, Kirātas, Daradas—that is to say, all the non-Hindu warrior populations of India or of foreign countries—Dravidians and Chinese, Persians and Greeks, Scythians and aborigines? They are, of course,

¹ X, 43-4.

bound by no tie of origin to the Brahmanic organization ; but it was essential at all costs to fit them into the preconceived scheme !

First of all, the theory of mixed castes makes a troublesome breach in the system. But what is to be said of the four principal castes ? We cannot doubt that the relegation of all the Sūdras to the condition of a mere mass of slaves is purely arbitrary. It is contradicted by the very status assigned to them from the civil point of view by parallel texts. Is it possible to believe that the three higher castes have ever formed those exclusive, compact, and ordered unities which one has pictured to oneself ? The Brahmanic caste is working out its destiny under our eyes. But how ? Not, as we have already seen, as a true caste, but as an agglomeration of innumerable castes, unequal in rights and social rank, separated in this respect by immense distances. We have only to recall the long lists of degraded and fallen Brahmans enumerated by tradition. It was not otherwise when the law-books were drawn up. As to the Kshatriyas and the Vaiśyas, the few traces which have survived even of their name are as doubtful as they are rare. Where it does appear, the name may have been taken afresh from tradition during recent times—a proceeding of which we have proved examples—in order to serve the arbitrary pretensions of a given group. They can nowhere

be encountered as separate, authentic castes. Up to the present we cannot see in them more than generic names, an enormous frame destined to hold and conceal the actual existence of an infinite number of divisions.

I have elsewhere had occasion to show,¹ in an article on the Indian theatre, how the Hindus proceed in order to establish theoretic teaching. A liking for classifications and a contempt for facts, a disregard of our idea of logic, and a superstitious respect for formulae—all these characterize their mental outlook, which conspires with the tyranny of the scholastic mind and the uncontested domination of a sacerdotal class to foster the growth of systems and to lend to the most artificial of these an entirely unmerited prestige. What is true of literature is no less true of religion and law, and we must not be shocked in India by opinions which elsewhere might be regarded as rash. The Hindu never hesitates to make generalizations regardless even of those reservations which to us seem most indispensable.

To take one example out of a hundred : There are four conditions of life for the Brahman faithful to his caste-duties. As a novice he must study the scriptures and the rules of sacrifices ; later he marries and founds a family of sons who will carry on the tradition of family ceremonies.

¹ *Revue des Deux Mondes*, May 1891.

Some retire into solitude in order to give themselves up to a life of austerities. Others, still more detached from the world, become mendicant ascetics. In the hands of the theorists these four conditions become regular stages which are to all appearance obligatory in the career of a Brahman. Are we to take these requirements seriously? We should be very wide of the mark if, following the texts, we were to imagine all Brahmans addicted solely to study and penance, dividing their career into four periods and dedicating the two last to the life of a hermit and to the profession of a wandering fakir! The editors of the books have simply welded into a system certain isolated and more or less exceptional facts, and lent an imperative aspect to what was no more than a rarely achieved ideal of perfection. In the same way, have we not seen a literary theorist creating a dramatic category out of a single play,¹ and converting a particular case into a universal rule?

Thus these religious and moral legislators obeyed a natural inclination which is very powerful in the Hindu mind. They also obeyed, more or less willingly, a personal and selfish tendency, the operation of which is everywhere patent, and finally deprived their work of the authority of a straightforward document. Before all else their

¹ *Revue des Deux Mondes*, art. cit., pp. 93 seq.

aim was to establish the absolute supremacy of the Brahmans. With them everything bears on their own glorification and is intended to further their interests. The books which come from their schools are designed to exalt their power and strengthen their pre-eminence. Sole purveyors of literature, it is they also who gave form to the epic traditions. It is therefore only natural that, in spite of accidental discrepancies, these latter reflect with as much insistence as the sacerdotal literature itself the pretensions of the Brahmans, and point out with equal emphasis the privileges to which they lay claim.

The law-books not only reserve for the Brahmans all the influential functions and privileges, but also invariably graduate the scale of criminal punishment in their favour. We have seen how the representative council or general assembly of the caste, under the direction of its appointed chief, is empowered to maintain internal law and order, to pronounce the necessary exclusions, or to assess the terms on payment of which the delinquent may escape exclusion. In this connexion Manu and Yājñavalkya speak only of assemblies of Brahmans versed in the sacred texts.¹ The idea of extending Brahmanic power is apparent here ; and indeed even to-day a Brahman, alone or

¹ Concerning these *parishads*, cf. Hopkins, *Mutual Relation of Castes*, pp. 43 seq ; V. N. Mandlik, *Vyavahāra Mayūkha*, p. 160, note.

co-opted to the council of the caste, often takes the preponderant part in these decisions. The whole of this literature is imbued with and animated by the spirit of Brahmanic ambition. It may be difficult to show in any detail the extent of its arbitrary action. It is certain that it colours more than one part of the picture, and that it misrepresents several of the motive-forces of the social organization as it has been sketched for us. The testimony of literary tradition must then clearly be accepted, but with many reservations.

This tradition seems to alternate strangely between correspondence with existing facts and divergence from them. Everything is easily understood, and contradictions are explained as local diversities, impossible symmetries as attempts at systematic explanation—provided we admit that the tradition corresponds to an absolutely analogous situation, some which still existed in recent times. This situation is only presented in a false perspective, with generalizations, corrections, and interpretations such as might be inspired either by the turn of mind peculiar to the Hindu or by a supreme preoccupation with Brahmanic interests.

I say analogous, but I should not venture to say identical. If any one fact stands out clearly from a general review of the castes, it is mobility of formation under the continuous action of fairly stable principles. This process is certainly not new ;

the causes which produce it have been at work for many centuries. The early situation which corresponds to the editing of the law-books and the Epic may therefore have diverged more or less in matters of detail from the present state of affairs, but it was wholly similar in its broad outlines. It is merely necessary, in the organization of castes as elsewhere, to reserve the possibility and probability of modifications such as time never fails to introduce into human institutions,¹ even after that first and decisive evolution which has determined their individuality.

In short, it is not theory which can give an account of facts ; it is facts which help us to see theory in its true light, and confine it within its proper limits.



¹ It has been readily admitted (e.g. H. Mayne, *Hindu Law and Usage*, pp. 67-8, 79-80) that the restrictions which prohibit marriage from caste to caste may have been less strict formerly, and that, in a general way, the rules of the caste have probably become increasingly exclusive. The completion in a final form of the *dharmaśāstras* and their growing authority would sufficiently explain the incessant tendency towards the spread of more rigorous and uniform practice. It is clear that our sources are far from allowing us to fix with precision, in the historic and documental period, the stages of a decisive evolution in this matter.

II. THE BRĀHMAṆAS AND THE VEDIC HYMNS

THE law-books and the Epic synchronize with an epoch when the Hindu world was definitely constituted. They rest on a twofold foundation of productions still more ancient : a stratum of sacerdotal literature, and below that the treasure of the Vedic hymns—that collection which, in the narrower terminology of the West, is called specifically the Veda. It is necessary for us to go back to this earlier stratum.

From ancient times the teachings proper to the sacerdotal schools were condensed into a species of aphorisms called Sūtras, of which we possess numerous collections. It is from this source that the law-books were drawn. Each is ultimately connected, in a manner more or less direct, with one or other of the schools. This technical literature itself crowns a long preparation represented by the Brāhmaṇas, the most remote testimony of religious reflection applied to the acts of sacrifice : singular books, where in the course of describing successive ceremonies the most rash etymological tricks and the most profound mysticism, childish deductions, and daring speculations

jostle one another. Nowhere do they treat of set purpose the subject which we are considering. We find only accidental indications, which are all the more valuable as they are few and far between.

According to an eminent authority, Herr Weber, 'the organization of castes is fully developed at this period of the Brāhmaṇas; from that date we find ourselves confronted by the same situation which appears to us idealized and codified in the laws of Manu.¹ In default of definite statements, the allusions and fragmentary information permit of no doubt on the subject.

The four castes appear there as already established in their respective individualities and privileges. The rights and duties of the Brahmans in particular are in complete accord with more modern descriptions; ² the necessary purity of the race is duly inculcated.³ Members of the three high castes are bound to take a first wife of equal rank, without prejudice, of course, to other secondary unions.⁴ The caste is destroyed by persistent neglect of initiation; ⁵ it would be destroyed by many other offences if graduated expiations did not open a way of escape from this supreme penalty.⁶ All intercourse with the excluded members, *patitas* (the fallen), is forbidden; ⁷ no union with them is allowed; no food may be

¹ A. Weber, *Indische Studien*, X, 2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 101 et seq.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41 et seq.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

taken from their hands. The preoccupation with impure contacts is ever present ; it is forbidden to eat with people of low origin,¹ or to use the vessels of Śūdras,² and a Brahman may not be a doctor³ on account of the pollutions rendered inevitable by the profession. The use of liquors is disapproved ;⁴ the use of meat is, in certain cases at least, prohibited ; while the flesh of various animals is forbidden.⁵ The mixed castes themselves find a place here, in fact, if not in theory. A considerable number are enumerated by name.⁶

If the rules are tempered in numerous ways, that by no means implies that they are in course of formation. In our times also, if we wished to resolve custom into general formulae, we should be thrown back on a multitude of similar reservations. We must learn to fathom the meaning of these uncertainties and contradictions, which are open, according to circumstances, to various explanations.

Taking certain passages literally, it would seem that the dignity of a Brahman was at that time the reward of knowledge and virtue rather than the privilege of birth.⁷ But experience, verified by all subsequent literature, teaches us the true

¹ Ibid., p. 74.

² Ibid., p. 16, note.

³ Ibid., p. 64.

⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 62, 63-4.

⁶ In the celebrated invocation of the Śatarudriya ; cf. *Indische Studien*, II, pp. 32 seq.

⁷ Weber, loc. laud., pp. 70-1.

significance of the language ; it is nothing but a device to glorify the supposed virtue and knowledge of the priests, and in no way involves forgetfulness of the rights conferred by birth alone. In one sense it might find literal justification ; neglect of religious obligations of which ignorance or vice may become the source is sufficient to bring about expulsion from the caste.

If the expiations for Brahmans are here rendered singularly mild in many cases, are we therefore to conclude that but little value was attached to the prerogatives whose integrity these were intended to restore ? I am all the less inclined to believe it, since even to-day the purifications and fines are, as we have seen, exceedingly light. Think, too, of that passionate glorification of Brahman greatness which is constantly exhibited,¹ of the absurdly exaggerated fees, amounting to hundreds of thousands of cows, which are demanded for their intervention in the sacrifices,² and of the coolness with which it is declared that in face of a lowlier adversary it is the judge's duty always to decide in favour of a Brahman, whatever wrongs he may have committed ! How could the author or editors of these books—all Brahmans—have been niggardly in granting to the Brahmans facilities either for evading or softening painful obligations or expiating their offences ? This very indulgence

¹ Weber, *loc. laud.*, pp. 35 et seq.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 52 et seq.

proves with what prestige they were already invested.

Without doubt this literature already rests on the foundations revealed by the law-books and the Epic. It is a pointless task to search in it for contemporary evidence of the foundation of the system, but in its exaggerations and in the completely exclusive inspiration by which it is permeated, it shows still more clearly at work the inclinations, interests, and defects whence has sprung, not the organization itself, but the system which gave it its dogmatic form. It exposes very clearly its artificial and speculative character. With its roots at least it comes into contact with the most primitive literary strata ; among the Vedic hymns are several which are beyond all doubt contemporary with the period during which it was growing up under the direction of the priests.

One of these hymns is held to be the earliest document explicitly proving the existence of castes in India. It is that which describes how the universe issued in its entirety from the substance of the primitive male, Purusha. The text declares that ' the Brahman was his mouth, the Rājanya (Kshatriya) his arms, the Vaiśya his thighs ', and that ' the Śūdra was born from his feet '. By common consent this passage is among the most recent of the venerable collection in

which it ranks, but it has profited to some extent by the prestige which attaches to the whole. On the other hand, in order to weigh up and comment on this piece of evidence, scholars have adopted the preconceived idea that the existence of castes must manifest itself in the form of the four castes of the mature system; to my mind, however, nothing could be less warranted.

One example will make my meaning clear. Haug,¹ and after him, with more precision, Kern,² have sought to show, contrary to the most generally received opinion,³ that not only were castes perfectly well known at the Vedic epoch, but that they go back farther—to the days when the ancestors of the Iranians and those of the Hindus lived side by side. They base their argument either on the texts of the Avesta or on the more recent evidence which shows the early population of Iran divided into four *pishtas*, analogous to the four *varṇas* of India. The existence of castes is nowhere attested in the history of Persia. The caste-idea is, however, in the opinion of Kern and Haug, so indissolubly connected with the quadruple division of Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaiśyas, and Śūdras, that in

¹ *Brahma und die Brahmanen*, in the Memoirs of the Academy of Munich.

² *Indische Theor. over de Standenverdeeling*, in the Memoirs of the Academy of Amsterdam, 1871, pp. 24 et seq.

³ A *résumé* of the controversy on the Vedic existence of castes will be found in Zimmer, *Altind. Leben*, pp. 185 et seq.

order to discover its equivalent in a kindred region they unhesitatingly conclude that the caste-system must have had a parallel existence in the two countries! I consider—and I shall return to this point—that Kern is perfectly justified in comparing the two series. I readily admit that there is more than an outward resemblance between them—there is an intimate affinity; but despite the fusion which has operated in India between this quadruple division and the caste-system nothing proves that the connexion is original or necessary, or that the one implies the other.

I must make my meaning clear. The official doctrine acknowledges four castes only, but reality bursts these narrow confines and reveals them in infinite numbers. And here there is a conflict of vital importance between facts and theory—the only one indeed which is not readily settled. Is it possible to argue a difference of time? But, as we have just seen, theory observes and admits by more than one indication and also by the very contradictions in which it is involved that from an early date castes have been very much more numerous than theory appeared at first sight to assume. I have already mentioned how unlikely it is that a Kshatriya and a Vaiśya caste ever really existed. These huge categories are, moreover, incompatible with the very rules—that

jealous exclusivism, that corporate and autonomous organization—which characterize caste as it is to-day.

The millions of persons in India who lay claim to the title of Brahman, and who are, in a sense, united by that name, are in reality divided into a multitude of perfectly distinct sections, each one of which possesses the attributes and features that characterize this caste. Ordinarily we speak of the Brahmanic caste ; we should say the *Brahmanic castes*. We include in a single generic term a multiplicity of castes, each one of which has its own individuality. Manu's admissions on the subject of the degraded Brahmans prove that he did exactly the same. Then, as now, the name Brahman included them all only as a general honorific title. The Mahābhārata mentions in one place ¹ that the son of a Brahman is a Brahman whatever his mother's origin may have been. This contradiction of Manu's rules is not necessarily so absolute as it first appears ; no matter what theory may say, it is quite possible for an individual to remain a Brahman although he suffers a change of caste.

In our own time the Rajputs, the military class of Western India, claim to correspond—as they do in fact in rank and profession—to the Kshatriyas of the system. Does this mean that they form

¹ *Anuśāsanap.* 2515, quoted by Kern, loc. laud., p. 42.

only one caste, or that they are merely the progressive subdivision of a single caste? We have observed, on the contrary, that under our very eyes castes assume without any right a name which offers them social advantages. Why, therefore, should this be regarded as new?

Here we put our finger on the true situation: the names of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra represent not four primitive 'castes', but four 'classes'. These classes may be exceedingly ancient; it is only in later times that they have been superimposed on the castes. Different by nature and origin, the true castes, or the organisms from which they sprang, were from the beginning more diverse and more numerous. This explanation alone accounts for the glaring incongruity apparent between fact and theory.

It is here that comparison with the Iranian texts assumes its full value. Between the four Iranian *piśhtras* and the four Hindu *varṇas*, the symmetry is significant:¹ the Athravas or priests corresponding to the Brahmans, the Rathaešthas or warriors to the Kshatriyas, the Vāstrya-Fshuyants or head of families to the Vaiśyas, and the Hūitis or manual workers to the Śūdras. The general resemblance is striking, and throws into the shade a few doubtful differences. The

¹ Cf. also Ludwig, *Rig Veda*, III, pp. 243-4.

Vaiśyas are, in Brahmanic tradition, chiefly regarded as cultivators and merchants, but Buddhist literature in calling them generally *grihapatis*¹ or 'householders' brings them strictly into line with the interpretation of the Iranian category. The Hūiti class is not described with a precision which allows us to institute a conclusive comparison with the Sūdras; but the very manner in which, as is often the case with Sūdras, it is left on one side, and consequently isolated from the three first classes, creates between the two, both represented as classes religiously and socially inferior, yet another and by no means a weak bond. In both cases the definite entry of the individual into the community of the higher classes is marked by an identical ceremony—the investiture of the sacred thread.² The correspondence is therefore perfect.

It has been questioned, and very rightly so, whether the *pishtvas* of Iran ever constituted castes.³ It is another matter to decide whether there existed in Iran germs whence the caste

¹ To quote one example only, cf. *Majjh. Nikāya*, ed. Trenckner, I, 85, 30 et seq.

² Spiegel, III, p. 700. It is very probable that in Iran, as in India, it was reserved for the three first classes; the fourth appears to have enjoyed only partial rights and to have been relegated to an inferior position (Geiger, p. 479 seq.). What might seem more doubtful, although Spiegel unhesitatingly accepts it (III, pp. 548–9), is whether the Hūitis were really included among the followers of Zoroastrianism, on whom the investitures ought to be conferred.

³ Spiegel, *Eran. Alterthumsk.*, II, pp. 551 et seq.; Geiger, *Ostiran. Cultur*, p. 485.

might have sprung, germs from which it has sprung in India. In any case, the four *pishtras* of the Avesta represent only *classes*, and in the beginning it was not otherwise with the quadruple Hindu division. If the partition agrees in both cases, it is because it goes back to a remote date ; if castes have been evolved in India alone, it is because this partition is not inherently and indissolubly bound up with the caste-system.

I know that there is a tendency to accommodate matters and to claim that the present disintegration is the result of the slow disorganization of a strict primitive unity. This is glaringly impossible. It is, however, a point to which I must return when enumerating the various theories which have been advanced in the endeavour to account for origins. For the present I shall confine myself to the scraps of information furnished by literary tradition ; we must probe deeply those indications which its oldest monuments offer for our researches.



III. CHARACTER AND ORIGIN OF THE SYSTEM. CLASSES AND CASTES

THE four castes, as I have indicated above, are not simply co-ordinated in Hindu sources. They are resolved into two groups, the one composed of the three higher, the other comprising the fourth alone.

The first embraces the *Āryas*, otherwise called the *dvijas*, persons to whose natural birth is added the religious rebirth conferred by initiation. The *Śūdras*, excluded from this kind of sacrament, have no part at all in learning or the sacred texts to which it serves as an indispensable introduction, no direct part whatever in sacrifices, nor in any of the ceremonies destined to sanctify the life of the higher castes in its various phases. At best they are allowed to celebrate certain inferior rites, and through that alone they are still, although only in a very humble degree, included within the common organization. Initiation is the door by which one enters into the great *Āryan* family ; as *Manu* expressly states, the *Āryan* himself is no better than the *Śūdra* until he has passed through this second birth. The division, then, is essential ; it is religious, not simply social. A dead man of

the three upper castes, if carried by a Śūdra, could not enter into heaven.¹ The strongest form of condemnation for certain offences among Brahmans is to proclaim that thereby they have become Śūdras,² that is to say, *outcasts*. Manu states that for the Śūdra there is no deadly sin, *pātaka*.³ For him there are, in fact, no offences involving degradation, for he has no access to those heights from which it is possible to fall.

So sharp a distinction can hardly fail, at the period to which our researches take us, to correspond to a national secession. It is impossible to discern whether the population comprised under the name of Śūdras was solely composed of those aboriginal elements which the Āryans met when immigrating from the north-west into India, or whether it included a mixture of elements. The point is of secondary importance. Between Āryas and Śūdras there was certainly an original opposition of race, more or less absolute. The interbreeding inevitable between conquerors and conquered, between invaders and aborigines, has succeeded in modifying the essential differences, but not in effacing the consciousness of the past.

It is significant of the excessive hostility and contempt with which the Śūdra was regarded that

¹ *Mānava Dh. Ś.*, V, 104.

² *Baudhāyana Dh. S.*, II, 3, 6, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, X, 126.

a text ¹ puts on the same level the murder of a Śūdra and the destruction of a chameleon, a peacock, or a frog. A Brahman novice has the right to take summarily and without leave from a Śūdra what he requires to pay his master's fees.² The most terrible punishments overtake a Śūdra who, even in external relations, should fail to keep at a proper distance from a person belonging to the three Āryan castes.

The literature of the Brāhmaṇas ³ establishes the antithesis between Śūdra and Ārya, Ārya embracing the three higher castes. A multitude of signs betrays between the two terms not merely inequalities of rank but the much deeper struggle of two religious traditions. The Vedic hymns reveal the struggle at its height.

The word *varṇa*, literally *colour*, is generally accepted as being in Sanskrit the name of the *caste*. In regard to this I shall have to make reservations. It is at any rate certain that it serves regularly to designate the four theoretic castes. This meaning is not known in the Veda. On the other hand, the word is there employed in two opposing phrases: *Ārya varṇa* and *Dāsa varṇa*, the 'Āryan race' and the 'enemy race'.⁴ They have still more transparent synonyms, such

¹ *Āpastamba Dh. S.*, I, 25, 13.

³ *Indische Studien*, X, pp. 4 et seq.

⁴ *Zimmer, Altind. Leben*, pp. 113-14.

² *Ibid.*, I, 7, 20-1.

as *black skin*, the *black people*. In more modern literature, the *black race* (*krishṇa varṇa*) continues sometimes to be opposed to the Brahmans.¹ This antithesis is therefore the completely equivalent prototype of that which later came to be expressed by *Ārya* and *Śūdra*, *Ārya varṇa* and *Śaudra varṇa*.²

Through whatever evolution its use may later have passed, the word *varṇa* was therefore first employed to distinguish between two different and hostile peoples; it characterized the one by the relative whiteness, the other by the blackness of its skin. If the 'Āryan Varṇas' signify in later literature the three castes reputed to be of Āryan stock, the expression was originally used in the singular: the 'Āryan Varṇa' was the collective designation of the whole light-coloured race of invaders.

It is therefore certain that the terminology of the system rests on a past which was different. It envelops in its network and fashions to its own ends divisions which originally were connected with quite different ideas, and terms which it has diverted from their first significance. Let us bear this warning in mind.

Whatever idea we may form of the state of

¹ *Āpastamba Dh. S.*, I, 28, 11.

² *Śatap. Brāhm.*, XIV, 4, 2, 26, cited *Indische Studien*, X, p. 10. *Ārya varṇa* and *Dāsa varṇa* are found in the *Sāṅkhāyana Brāhmaṇa*, cited *Indische Studien*, X, p. 4, note.

things during the Vedic period, it is incontestable that the hymns distinguish three main categories among the Āryan population—priests, chiefs, and people. We find priests, under various titles, incessantly occupied with sacrificial acts and the composition of the songs that accompany them ; we follow the chiefs in combat and assemblies ; while the people are always spoken of in a plural which generally shows the ‘ clans ’ of which it is composed gathered round the chiefs in warfare.

That sacerdotal functions were by this time strongly organized and protected against over-easy intrusions is warranted by their complicated nature alone. It is universally admitted that the royal power, or more generally the dignity of the nobles, had here, as everywhere else, a marked tendency to become established by a more or less strict heredity. But certainly only a mind strongly biased and determined in advance to find in the past the teachings of the Brahmanic system can discover in this triple classification ‘ castes ’ in the strict meaning of the word and as implied by the more modern doctrine and usage. None of the characteristics which constitute the caste is expressly mentioned.

The three terms are sometimes found together ; they palpably comprise the entire Āryan people. One verse asserts that the *Viśas* (clans) bow spontaneously to the chief (*rājan*), who is preceded

by a Brahman (*Brahman*)¹; that is to say, in technical language, before the king who has a *purohita*, or family-priest. While proving that the claims of sacerdotal power are already established, it presents the situation in its true light: the king and the priest, in the function proper to them, on the one side, and on the other the people. We are then in the presence of classes, more or less exclusive and jealous, but not of castes.

We cannot, however, fail to recognize that this triple division corresponds exactly to the three first castes of the Brahmanic theory. How are we to explain this fact?

Of the names borne by the three castes, *Brāhmaṇa* alone is to be found in the hymns (excepting, as is proper, the hymn to Purusha, of which I have spoken above, which assumes as complete this system whose origins we are attempting to fathom). Even this is rare. The primitive form *Brahman* is frequent; in the neuter it is the accepted word used collectively for all the sacerdotal functions. Of the two names which at a later date designate the warriors, *Kshatriya*, which as an epithet expressing power is often appended to the names of certain gods, is only applied to chiefs once or twice in passages suspected of belonging to a recent period; *Rājanya* is unknown. On the other hand, the simple form

¹ *Rig-Veda*, VIII, 35, 16-18.

Rājan is the common title of the nobles. The term *Kshatra* summarizes the idea of royal power. The name of the *Vaiśyas* is foreign to the hymns, while the primitive *Viś* is, in the plural, the invariable name of those 'clans' which constitute the mass of the nation. The trinity *Brahma*, *Kshatra*, and *Viś*, embracing the whole Āryan people, is not encountered only in the Veda. In the later literature of the *Brāhmaṇas* it is still an accepted thing.¹ It is repeated with an insistence which testifies to an ancient and respected origin in the very books which know and employ on occasion the definite terms : *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaiśya*.

It is clear, I think, that these terms are derived from the ancient formula, a technical and academic derivation. The social order with which they are associated is not merely the spontaneous and organic extension of the situation reflected by the Veda ; like the words in which it is embodied, it represents a carefully thought-out system, adapted to conditions either entirely new or at least very different from those whence the primitive triple division originated.

To interpret the Vedic testimony by the Brahmanic theory of a more recent age is to reverse the true order of things.

As people inferior to the Āryan tribes and

¹ Cf. *Indische Studien*, X, pp. 18-19, 27.

as their constant adversaries the hymns only know the *Dāsa varṇa*, the enemy race, whom they call also *Dasyus*. The Śūdras are unknown to them. The name *Dasyus* has, on the contrary, been taken into literature and applied to the lowest strata of the population—to those who, having no regular place in the Brahmanic organization, are sometimes even to-day called *outcasts*. In the Vedic epoch there existed no stratum of population corresponding to the Śūdras, at once excluded from the Āryan community and attached to it by certain loose bonds in order to secure its dependence without detrimental compromise ; or, if it did exist, the poets whose songs have come down to us have made no efforts to assign it a place apart, outside the mass of the *Dasyus*. This is a further proof that the system is something quite other than the normal development of the Vedic situation.

The Viśas of the Veda were not limited to a caste, but included everything in the Āryan population which was not distinguished by sacerdotal functions or aristocratic rank ; and consequently Brahmanic theory in creating the derivative *Vaiśya* may have given to the primitive word an application somewhat arbitrary and historically false, of which we have an indication that must on no account be forgotten. The name *Arya*, although it does not appear to be used thus

in the hymns, is incontestably synonymous with Ārya. It is sometimes thus employed in the sacerdotal literature, but there it is in the main specially applied to the Vaiśyas.¹ It was therefore quite clearly remembered that the Vaiśyas really formed the whole class of free men, the bulk of the nation. There is a world of difference between this loose grouping and the true caste, which is necessarily more restricted. The caste was devoted to the pursuit of a definite profession and was bound together by common descent and by the discipline of its own rules and customs.

I have accepted up to now the popular view that *varṇa*, in the Brahmanic theory, is the term which corresponds exactly to the idea of caste. The concession was merely provisional, and needs to be qualified. It was used at first to denote a contrast of colour between two rival races, and was later split up, if I may so express it, so that it might apply no longer to these two primitive *varṇas*, but to more numerous categories. It has not lost all trace of its origin. It does not signify caste in general and in the strict sense, but only 'the four castes'. It applies only to what an epic book, the *Harivamśa*, calls in one passage the 'four legal castes'. To designate the others, those secondary or mixed castes which correspond, not to the

¹ *Indische Studien*, X, pp. 5, 7, 16.

theoretic divisions, but to the true castes which actually exist, the law-books have another term, *jāti*. This term is the exact equivalent of our word 'caste', as it means 'birth, race'. It is, I think, in this acceptation, not in that of 'family', that it should be understood wherever it is employed by Manu, Yājñavalkya, and others. It has been a mistake not to attribute sufficient importance to this distinction between the two terms, which signalizes up to a fairly late period the two elements which are combined in the Brahmanic theory.

The conclusion is inevitable. The Veda, depository of a distant past, reflects a division of *classes*, for which the comparison with Iran and other indications besides attest a very great antiquity. As for the more modern literature, it found itself not only by reason of its origin involved in a system of castes, but also enslaved to the Vedic tradition of which it was obliged to accept unreservedly the whole heritage. Memories of the past and actualities of the present were fused in a hybrid system: the living order of the castes was made to fit in with old divisions of races and classes which were transmogrified for the purpose. These incoherences had no terror for a scholastic speculation which was more contemptuous than any other of facts and of history. Its work was, moreover, facilitated by what certainly survived

of class spirit, as manifested in the minute subdivision of the castes.

In our own times all Brahmans are still imbued with pride of class ; it surmounts all the inequalities and differences which separate them in point of fact into a multitude of castes. All the more must this have been the case at a time when the Āryan people were less widely diffused, the mixture of races less far advanced, and the breaking up into groups still more restricted. Even among the warrior-aristocracy and whatever may have been its subdivision into clans, tribes, or castes, pride of class and class interests could not fail to preserve a powerful influence and to maintain a certain unity. Unquestionably this feeling of relative unity was for the priestly class, ambitious and already erudite, both peculiarly indispensable and easy to safeguard. Between classes and castes there is no positive incompatibility ; the two social orders may combine and complete one another. The mistake lies in confusing their origins.

The authority of the Brahmanic theory alone has succeeded in obscuring this profound distinction under an unfortunate illusion. It has caused credence to be given to a complete inversion of roles. Through its insidious influence we have persisted in seeking the origin of small and very active groups in categories which are no more than

their collective exponents, the value of which has become nominal, and which have been superimposed, not so much by organic development as by a skilful operation, on a social order to which they are fundamentally alien.

The question whether castes existed in the Vedic epoch has been much discussed and without a sufficiently close scrutiny of terms. The hymn to Purusha has, by common assent, been considered too recent to be admitted as evidence on this head. The above observations do not solve the problem, but they will at least result in causing partisans or opponents of the existence of castes in Vedic times to make very material modifications in their base of operations.

It is of little importance that the word '*varṇa*' in no way signifies '*caste*' in the hymns, if it be true that this word has never strictly had this meaning, or at least that it has only acquired it by virtue of a late extension. If it be true that we are dealing with classes and not with castes, we can draw no conclusion from the fact that we see a triple division in the population whose existence we may be justified in inferring in a still remoter past. The societies in which class-hierarchy appears are too various for it to possess any inherent significance. Caste, being by nature a circumscribed and separatist organism, must necessarily have other roots.

The real problem is to determine whether, below these great categories of priests, warrior-nobles, and freemen, and inscribed, so to speak, within these wide circles, there is in the hymns any trace of hereditary groups, united by any one of the factors—consanguinity, profession, religion, residence—which to our knowledge contribute to the constitution of the castes ; of organisms, in a word, identical with or merely analogous to the caste. This is what we have to investigate ; whether the search will be fruitful is quite another matter.

No one has delved into the Veda with more expert knowledge than Ludwig, nor with a stronger predisposition to unearth in it a caste-system. He has allowed no negative conclusions, not even the most authoritative, to deter him. His search has, on the whole, been fruitless ; he has indeed discovered classes, but not castes. No one can doubt but that the very intricacies of the rites and songs bound the priesthood firmly together, even in the Vedic epoch, and that its functions were often, even habitually, hereditary. Ludwig has proved no more than that a class was formed of rich chiefs, powerful by force of arms, and that this nobility in India, as elsewhere, depended essentially on birth. He has met with none of the positive limitations which caste implies, neither has he proved that those

Maghavans, whom he likens to the Kshatriyas, belonged to an exclusive group.

Ludwig in the end himself recognizes that he can only discern two distinct classes—the one of priests and the other of nobles—placed above the mass of the Āryan people, the Viśas. If he considers these indications to be sufficient ground for affirming the existence of an order of castes, it is because he has taken the Brahmanic system as his starting-point. At least tacitly he considers this system to be the exact expression of the facts, and consequently takes any traces which in the past seem to agree with it as proof that at the time from which they date it existed in its entirety. This, to my mind, is begging the question.

Zimmer¹ was certainly justified in taking advantage of it to support the opposite theory. It is another matter to decide whether, conversely, it is certain that no castes existed at the epoch when the most ancient hymns were composed. If we consider how small a place the working of the caste—I am not referring to the domination of the Brahmans or nobles as classes—really occupies in the whole of subsequent literature in spite of its supreme importance in practical and social life, we shall admit that the mere silence of the texts has little weight here. I believe that the caste has its origin in a normal evolution of

¹ *Altind. Leben*, p. 185.

the ancient constitution of the family—an organic evolution, but one peculiar to India, since it is determined by ethnological, economic, geographical, and psychological conditions which are essentially native. If this is true, the movement must have been produced too slowly and rests on elements of life too primitive and instinctive for a literature like that of the hymns, which was already ambitious and learned, to afford much useful proof as to these elements and their development.

The system manifested in Hindu tradition did not yet exist at the time of the ancient hymns, or at least it was not recognized by their authors. So much is certain, since the principal terms of the theory were derived from themes which were not yet familiar to the hymns except in their primitive state, and since the general tenor of the theory was influenced to the point of distortion by the desire to approximate it to the tradition of the hymns. This Brahmanic system has, however, from time immemorial concealed an essentially different situation. The absence of the system is not therefore enough to prove that the *de facto* situation which inspires it only arose at a later date.

Its complete development does not seem frankly compatible with the historical and economic conditions which emerge from the Veda; it

might, nevertheless, have existed at that time, although only in an earlier phase and in process of advancing towards its final constitution.

I greatly fear that the texts will never furnish a decisive answer. Doubt is all the more permissible in proportion as the true position of the hymns in Hindu antiquity is still imperfectly determined ; for we still discern but vaguely the precise moment of historical evolution to which they correspond. They reflect an ancient epoch, but not without the admixture of a multitude of purely Hindu traits ; the civilization which follows pays them the most extravagant respect, while itself building on a profoundly different religious and dogmatic, geographical, and social foundation. Who can profess to-day to determine the exact relation of these two phases ?



IV. ORIGINS ACCORDING TO LEGEND: RIVALRIES BETWEEN PRIESTS AND NOBLES

CONCERNING the genesis of the castes the Hindus possess nothing but a few legends which signify very little. They bear a symbolic and superficial stamp. The most widespread—the one with which we are already familiar—is that which derives the Brahmans from the mouth, the Kshatriyas from the arms, the Vaiśyas from the thighs, and the Śūdras from the feet of the demiurge. Even where it is pressed into service, as in Manu, it is obviously an adjunct which disturbs the order of the cosmic theory. This is still clearer in the Rāmāyaṇa, in which, finally, the castes appear to be derived from Manu, wife of Kaśyapa,¹ somewhat as in Iran the three classes are in turn derived either from Yima, the first king, or from Zarathuṣtra, the great religious initiator.²

The variants in certain Brāhmaṇas ³ are nothing more than clever exercises, little etymological arrangements of no weight or importance. In the

¹ Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, p. 117.

² Spiegel, *Eran. Alterth.*, III, p. 554.

³ *Indische Studien*, X, pp. 7 et seq.

majority of the speculations on the origin of human beings castes are left entirely out of account.¹ The trains of reasoning which connect their appearance either with successive ages of the world ² or with the natural inclinations of mankind have neither more authority nor more stability than an adventitious fiction which reserves for each caste its own particular heaven.³

All these explanations are recent and academic. Like the whole of tradition, they are inspired by the system of four fundamental castes.

I have spoken in passing of those often violent conflicts which arise here, there, and everywhere between neighbouring castes. They blaze up over some special privilege to which a caste cannot bear to see its right contested. They bear no comparison, either by nature or casual importance, with the class-struggles for domination which must have taken place between priests and nobles in the past.

There can be no doubt that the delimitation of prerogatives and the balance of privileges between the sacerdotal and noble classes have never from the beginning really possessed the absolute precision ascribed to them by the dogmatic texts. We know how much variability of practice is concealed beneath the strictness of the rules.

¹ Cf., for example, Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, pp. 22 et seq.

² Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, p. 149.

³ Ibid., pp. 86 et seq.

Whatever care the sacerdotal class may have taken to reserve for itself the privilege of ritual acts and sacred studies, this privilege suffered many exceptions, especially in the early period. The chiefs, admitted to receive religious teaching, must, in more than one case and in spite of opposing claims, have set themselves up in their turn as teachers. A number of Vedic songs are attributed to Kshatriyas, even to Vaiśyas.¹ If the hymns themselves so insistently exhort the chiefs to have near their person a professional priest (*purohita*), this is perhaps because they often dispensed with this duty. In several cases the sons of nobles fulfilled this function.² The sacerdotal literature bears witness to the great learning of certain kings, who outdo even the Brahmans themselves. The books which exhibit the Brahmanic theory in its complete development provide also for the case, certainly exceptional, where a Brahman may take as master a Kshatriya or a Vaiśya.³

Legend has also preserved for us the names of women of Brahmanic or royal race who possessed vast theological learning and oratorical gifts.⁴

There is even a case where the Brāhmaṇa, after extolling the knowledge possessed by a king (Janaka) of the Videha, seems by way of conclusion

¹ Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, pp. 265 et seq. ² Zimmer, *op. laud.*, p. 196.

³ *Āpastamba Dh. S.*, II, 4, 25.

⁴ *Indische Studien*, X, pp. 118-19; *Sanskrit Texts*, p. 430.

to declare that he had become a Brahman.¹ It is the legend of Viśvāmitra, however, which furnishes the most famous example of a promotion of this kind. The Vedic hymns indicate a long rivalry between Viśvāmitra and Vasishṭha ; perhaps the favour of King Sudās and the office of private chaplain were at stake. The texts are obscure and their combination doubtful. Be that as it may, the primitive theme in the Epic has become embellished with copious variations ; it tells in precise terms of a violent struggle which was waged between the two personages as to which of them should possess the miraculous cow, Surabhi, which grants all prayers. Extraordinary austerities are involved, and at the end Viśvāmitra, who belonged by origin to the royal line of Kuśikas, became a Brahman.

It is an odd delusion to profess to use such tales as documents bearing on the history of caste. All that they can show is that in spite of the claims of the Brahmanic class a monopoly of religious life and activity has never really been exclusively theirs. The outstanding fact is that at the period when they took definite form Brahmanic ambition had received its final consecration in the system which is the law. To admit that a Kshatriya might not touch sacred things except by becoming a Brahman was, in the eyes of Brahmans, another

¹ *Śatap. Brāhm.*, cited by Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, pp. 426-9.

way of paying homage to their privilege. A rare exception, very dearly bought, confirmed the rule. It is impossible to see in it a proof that changes of caste have been officially recognized, still less that the legend is older than the caste-system. The utmost we may infer from it is that the rule entrusting the religious ministry solely to the Brahmanic castes, being foreign to the archaic constitution of the rites, which did not assume a privileged priesthood, suffered in remote antiquity still more exceptions than in later times which were further removed from the primitive family-priesthood.

It may be tempting, but it is unquestionably dangerous, to coin history from legend. The process demands very delicate handling.

The stories either from the Epic or from the Purāṇas, recalling the harsh acts of certain kings towards the Brahmans and the punishments meted out to them in consequence, have been laboriously collected.¹ We hear of Vena forbidding the priests to make sacrifices ; of Purūravas depriving them of their jewels ; of Nahusha causing his chariot to be drawn by a thousand Brahmans, and other tales. Scholars have seen in them the traces of the struggle for predominance between Brahmans and nobles. We may,

¹ Muir, *Sanskrit Texts*, I, pp. 226 et seq. ; Lassen, *Ind. Alterth.*, I, pp. 705 et seq.

without offence, question whether they all really do reflect memories of this kind.

The most suggestive is without doubt the story of Paraśu-Rāma. The son of Jamadagni, he belonged to the line of the Bhārgavas. One day King Arjuna, who had been received into the hermitage of Jamadagni, treacherously repaid this hospitality by stealing the calf of the cow that the holy man was about to sacrifice. Quick to avenge the paternal wrong, our hero, holy but truculent, twenty-one times devastated the Kshatriya race. Such destruction did he wreak that, according to certain versions of the legend, all the warriors disappeared, and no other course lay open to the Brahmans, if they were to restore to the earth its tutelary masters and the indispensable equilibrium to the social organization, but to unite with the widows of the Kshatriyas to found together a new caste of nobles. What is really the origin of this story? Does it reflect a vast class-struggle between nobles and priests? This conclusion appears to me, I admit, less obvious than to other critics; but it is not worth while to argue the point. The story undoubtedly betrays exceedingly strained relations between the two classes, at least in certain places and at certain times.

A domination such as the Brahmans achieved, which they were obliged to strengthen with each

century, is not set up unquestioned. The care that their books take, at all times, from the Vedic hymns onwards, to establish the dogma of their superiority in the strongest and most extravagant terms, shows clearly the persevering labour that has been necessary to ensure its success. It has been correctly pointed out ¹ that a whole series of hymns of the Atharvaveda seems to reflect a period, or at least numerous examples, of conflicts between Brahmans and Kshatriyas. It is clear, moreover, that from time immemorial the power which they possessed as representatives *par excellence* of the noble class secured for the kings a position which the outward respect and superstitious docility accorded to the priests could not shake.

The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* ² states that 'there is nothing above the royal power' (*Kshatra*); it hastens to explain that, being produced by the creative energy of the 'religious power' (*Brahma*), it must respect this as its own source; the admission is none the less perfectly clear. In Buddhism social superiority is readily attributed to the military class.³ It is because of this superiority, we are assured, that Śākyamuni was born of a royal family. Coming from a Buddhist source, the testimony is less suspect than we might

¹ Zimmer, pp. 197 et seq.

² XIV, 4, 2, 23.

³ Cf., for example, the verse *Mājjh. Nikāya*, ed. Trenckner, I, p. 358.

be inclined to imagine. The *Dhammapada*, a Buddhist book, and one of the oldest and most authentic, extols the Brahman in a series of eloquent strophes, taking him over and over again as personifying the very ideal of human perfection. At the time of the Brāhmaṇa, as in the time of Buddhism, the caste-system reigned supreme.

Neither the traces of conflicts between nobles and Brahmans, nor certain exceptional transfers (supposing them authentic) from one group to another, prove that the caste was in a rudimentary state at the period to which the testimony dates back. Class-struggles and conflicting influences belong to all epochs, and are grafted on the most diverse of social constitutions. These incidents in no way exclude, any more than they inherently imply, the contemporaneous existence of the caste.

The first documentary evidence that we possess of the existence of the caste is the appearance of the system which professed to regulate it. It manifests itself in the most remote period of sacerdotal literature, and even in the most recent strata of the Vedic hymns.

Naturally, the system is later than the facts which it professes to codify and revise. When it appears, it is because the caste is already the recognized social order ; but for how long has it

been so ? This is what we are unable to ascertain exactly. Not only did the caste exist, but everything indicates that it existed in a condition fundamentally identical with that of to-day.

The texts of themselves would no doubt be inadequate to demonstrate this, but in order to understand them clearly it is enough to throw upon them what, as I have said, they so sorely need—the light derived from our experience of the present.

Theory has concealed and falsified reality in them. Correlating, by a more or less artificial compromise, actual facts with the tradition of a vanished past, it identifies caste-distinctions with the old distinctions of class, and superimposes the one upon the other, giving to those classes that it represents as castes a borrowed name which at first denotes a racial division. If it allows some hint of the real complexities and confusion to peep through all this symmetrical and systematic construction, it is relegated to the background, and concealed, as in the theory of mixed castes, under an artificial regularity.

Literature, then, is insufficient for our purpose. It has preserved neither sound historical sequence nor conclusive traces of the past. If I have been obliged to demonstrate this at some length, the attentive student will perhaps find compensation in discovering here an instructive example of the

obscurity peculiar to Hindu tradition, the difficulties which it presents to our curiosity, and the caution which its use demands.

We have now no other resource than to broach the question of origins directly.



PART III

ORIGINS

Introductory. I. Explanatory Theories, the Traditionalists. II. Occupation as the basis of Caste : Nesfield and Ibbetson. III. Race as the basis of Caste : Risley. IV. Caste and the Aryan Constitution of the Family. V. Genesis of the Hindu Castes. VI. General Survey : the Caste System and the Hindu Mind

INTRODUCTORY

SINCE it first invited research, the problem of the origin of castes has often been re-examined, and from several angles. Many theories have been advanced, but I believe I can without scruple shorten the list.

I am excluding from the outset explanations which, too general or too hasty, are not based on a sufficiently careful and competent study of the field in which the problem arises.

Among attempts recent enough to be completely well informed several groups stand out prominently. It will suffice to show their tendencies by giving examples. This will not be a mere idle exercise, for such a summary view will enable us to clear the ground, and, if only by a process of elimination, to make our approach to probable solutions.

I. EXPLANATORY THEORIES. THE TRADITIONALISTS

IF the Hindus have confused the two ideas and the two terms 'classes' and 'castes', there are those among us who have followed in their erring footsteps with regrettable docility. I refer especially to Indianists. Representatives of the philological school, they obey an almost irresistible preference to regard the problem from this traditional aspect. The Brahmanic theory is, as it were, their native atmosphere, and literary chronology their invariable starting-point.

Faithful to a principle which, to all appearance, must be adopted *a priori*—the dangers and flimsiness of which, in its application to India, I have already pointed out—the majority have admitted as an obvious certainty that the sequence of literary monuments must correspond to historic evolution and faithfully reflect its phases. The Brāhmaṇas, which in order of time are most nearly connected with the hymns, could not therefore contain anything which was not the extension or the normal development of ideas embodied therein. Hence the following dilemma : either the existence of castes is attested in the

Veda, or, if this is not so, castes must have been established in the period which separates the composition of the hymns, which presumably knew them not, from the composition of the Brāhmaṇas, which assume their existence; on which follows the corollary, implicit, but none the less persistent, that it is in the elements expressly furnished by the hymns that the origins of caste must find their justification.

No one, so far as I am aware, or practically no one, has rid himself of this postulate. It has been considered a matter of obligation to regard as the indubitable starting-point the divisions which, by common consent, are revealed in the Veda, castes complete and attested according to some, social classes according to others. The first school are all the more desirous to discover castes in the hymns because they rightly feel how difficult it is to attribute to them, in accordance with the usual method, a too recent origin. The second conclude from the silence of the hymns that the epoch to which these date back knows nothing of castes, and that the movement can therefore only have taken shape later. Both agree in regarding as primitive and indissoluble the bond which connects the four *varṇas* of the system with the very birth of the caste-institution.

Under this impression students are only too ready to believe that they have done all that is

necessary when they have deduced a rational explanation from general considerations supported by uncertain analogies.

Those masters of linguistic analysis who derive the Indo-European vocabulary from some few hundred roots believe that in these tongues, which retain the highest degree of etymological transparency, they have approached the first lisplings of human speech ; they consider that from this to the origin of language is a negligible step, or almost so. Among the explanations which the caste has evoked, some recall this facile optimism, which has worked havoc even in those minds apparently best armed to resist it.

Sherring, for example, has devoted an immense amount of labour to the direct study of contemporary castes.¹ When he thought of co-ordinating his general views on the ' Natural History of the Caste ', ² he set out the problem in terms which fully bore out the promise of his title. It is a curious thing that a preconceived notion should have been able to sterilize so much observation and learning. Sherring has shown us nothing in caste beyond the outcome of the political cunning of ambitious priests who, building from top to bottom, fashioned to their own ends the constitution of the Hindu world.

A comparison with the Jesuits and their

¹ *Tribes and Castes in Benares.*

² *Calcutta Review.*

theocratic designs generally plays a quite excessive part in these statements. We meet with it even in one of the more recent representatives of the philological school. Von Schroeder ¹ does not at first seem inclined to exaggerate the authority of the Brahmanic system: he feels that the quadruple division into priests, warriors, etc., can only correspond to a distinction of classes. Nevertheless, it is from them, and above all from the constitution peculiar to the Brahmans, that he derives the castes. Were we to believe him, the system would be linked with the victorious reaction of Brahmanism against expiring Buddhism, so that its formation would be advanced to the epoch when appeared the man in whom was personified this movement—hypothetical, in any case—that is, up to Śaṅkara, the orthodox philosopher of the eighth century !

These are the systems that I shall call traditionalist. They are repeated and transmitted without any great striving after novelty. However ingenious they may be in certain parts, an analysis would scarcely be profitable. Roth,² for example, has explained the early progress of the sacerdotal caste by a presumed importance gradually acquired by the *purohita* or family priest of the chiefs. He supposes that the Āryan peoples,

¹ *Indiens Litteratur und Cultur*, pp. 152 et seq., 410 et seq.

² *Zeitschr. der Deutschen Morgenl. Gesellsch.*, I, pp. 81 et seq.

when they spread over the plains of India, split up into numerous sections, minutely subdivided, that the royal families consequently lost both power and authority and descended to the rank of mere nobility ; that the Kshatriyas became the small fry of the former kings ; and that it was the weakness of the latter which built up the rule of the Brahmans. All the opinions of a mind so subtle and well-informed are of value, but this theory really concerns only the history of classes, not the genesis of castes.

To confound the one with the other is, in my opinion, to produce general confusion. I have given several reasons for this. The class and the caste correspond neither in extent, in character, nor in natural tendencies. Each one, even among the castes which would belong to one and the same class, is plainly distinguishable from its fellows ; it isolates itself from them with a rigour which is not tempered by any regard for an underlying unity. The class subserves political ambition ; the caste obeys narrow scruples, traditional customs, or, at most, certain local influences which have as a rule no relation to class-interests. Above all, the caste clings to the safeguarding of an integrity which is the subject of deep concern and sensitiveness even with the humblest. It is the distant echo of the class-struggles, handed down by legend, with which tradition resounds. By

the reaction of principles on facts the two institutions may have become fused together ; they are none the less essentially independent.

The hierarchic division of the population into classes is practically universal, but the caste-system is a unique phenomenon. That Brahmanic ambition has taken advantage of it in order the more firmly to establish its domination is possible but not obvious. A caste-system is not the necessary basis of a theocracy. If theory has confused the two sets of ideas, this is a fact of secondary importance, as we have actually seen when dealing with tradition. In order to understand the historic development we must distinguish carefully between the two ideas ; remembering, however, to investigate how they came to be finally combined. Sacerdotal speculation has obscured the facts by means of an artificial system, and we must be careful not to mistake the curtain which hides them from our view for the facts that are hidden.

It may appear very simple to derive, in the Brahmanic manner, an infinite number of groups from the successive breakings-up of large primitive categories. Who can fail to recognize that this subdivision is prompted by interests and a bias directly opposed to the class-spirit, which tends naturally to closer unity? Caste, subject to varying principles of unification, geographical,

professional, sectarian, etc., shows itself consistently insensible to considerations of a general nature. Class-spirit takes no heed of any of the peculiarities and scruples which constitute the foundations of caste, and sets up, even between groups belonging in a general way to the same class, so many lofty barriers.

These systems therefore state the matter badly ; they start from an arbitrary principle which they do not demonstrate, and which is obviously inadequate. This is not all. Their excessive respect for the so-called evidence of literature compels them to advance the beginnings of the system to an unduly late period, when everything indicates that the life of India was already firmly set in its final mould. Yet another improbability ! An institution so universal in Hindu society, endowed with a vitality so elastic as to appear almost indestructible, cannot fail to be attached to the very roots of national development. Were it of late growth, it would at least, if destined to attain such sovereign power, have left clearer traces of its beginnings.

One trait is common to all the systems belonging to this category : they are too apt to lose sight of existing facts and to ignore the comparisons and ideas which are evoked by the life of those peoples imperfectly or recently assimilated to the predominant Hinduism.

This consideration holds, on the contrary, a place of honour in works animated by leading ideas of another kind, and deriving either from sociological doctrines or from anthropology.



II. OCCUPATION AS THE BASIS OF CASTE : NESFIELD AND IBBETSON

NESFIELD is obsessed by general ethnographic views ; his faith in positivist classifications is uncompromising to a degree quite astonishing in an age which has largely renounced all dogmatism. He is at least perfectly clear in his conclusions ; we may hesitate to follow him, but we know where he is going.

Common occupation is, in his eyes, the foundation of the caste ; it is the centre round which it has grown up. He admits no other origin ; he deliberately excludes all influence of race and religion. In his eyes it is pure illusion to distinguish in India distinct currents of population, Āryan and aboriginal. The wave of invasion was early absorbed in the mass ; unity was very soon established, and was already acquired more than a thousand years before the Christian era. Only the constitution of castes succeeded in introducing a disturbing factor, thanks to occupational speciality.

The castes would otherwise have developed according to an absolute order, the order which the march of human progress follows in life, in

agriculture, in the industries ; the social rank assigned to each would be precisely that occupied in this sequence by the particular trade which it practises.¹

Thus, among the artisan castes he perceives two great divisions : the first corresponds to the trades before metal-working—this is the lower ; the second and higher one represents the metallurgical industries, or is contemporaneous with their development. He has expended remarkable ingenuity in establishing on analogous bases within the group to which it belongs the precedence of each caste, as determined in his view by Hindu usage. The groups are thus ranked according as they are more particularly concerned with hunting, fishing, pastoral pursuits, landed property, manual trades, commerce, servile occupations, or sacerdotal functions. To use his own words : ²

‘ Each caste or group of castes represents one or other of those progressive stages of culture which have marked the industrial development of mankind, not only in India, but in every other country in the world. The rank of any caste as high or low, depends upon whether the industry represented by the caste belongs to an advanced or backward stage of culture ; and thus the natural history of human industries

¹ Nesfield, *Caste System*, § 9.

² Ibid., p. 88.

affords the chief clue to the gradations as well as to the formation of Indian castes.'

Starting from this point, Nesfield shows us the different occupations emerging from the tribe to constitute themselves into sectional units, and these units rising in the social scale according to the trades by which they live.¹ The caste rises from the tribe, the fragments of which it re-composes according to a new principle, and it has retained persistent memories of its origins. It is from the ancient type of the tribe that it has borrowed the narrow marriage-rules and the strict prohibition of all friendly approach to similar groups.

According to this theory, the caste-system springs from the regular evolution of social life, starting at its lowest level and following in its slow progression. How he can reconcile this with the relatively late date to which, on the other hand, he refers the constitution of the castes, I do not pretend to understand. What likelihood is there that a thousand years before our era the Hindus were still barbarians, devoid of the most rudimentary elements of civilization?

Still less can I fathom how Nesfield, holding this point of view, comes to reserve to the Brahmans so decisive a part in this genesis. Indeed,

¹ Nesfield, *Caste System*, §§ 177-8, 180-2.

he affirms that ' the Brahman was the first-born of castes, the model upon which all the other castes were subsequently formed, extending gradually from king or warrior to the tribes practising hunting and fishing, whose rank is no higher than that of the savage '. It is from the Brahmans, thanks to the contagion of example and the necessity for self-defence, that the exclusivism of all the castes emanated.¹ The Brahman is the founder of the system. He it is ² who has invented for his own benefit the rule which alone rendered their constitution complete, the rule prohibiting marriage with a woman of another caste ; a curious contradiction of later passages where he derives the regulation of marriage from the traditional usages of the tribe.

It is not that he is duped by the dogmatism of the religious books. In his opinion ' the old fourfold division was never actually in force in India except as a current tradition, the only reality which attaches to it to this day '. Borrowed from the Indo-Iranian past, it has hardly any other value than that of connecting the diversity of the castes with functional differences. The Vaiśyas and the Śūdras in particular have never been anything except a kind of rubric intended to embrace a multitude of heterogeneous elements.³ But, evidently without overcoming the charm

¹ Ibid., §§ 171-2.

² Ibid., §§ 169, 190.

³ Ibid., § 11.

exercised on his mind by positivist constructions, Nesfield has clearly felt that for want of a corrective his theory proved too much, that it ought to be applicable to all countries. In spite of his natural independence, he has also doubtless come under the influence of tradition. However that may be, the concession which he makes to it, far from being inherent in his system, disturbs its whole ordinance. The originality of his thesis is to be found elsewhere. Though others before him have assigned an active part in the genesis of the castes to professional groups, no one has so deliberately found in these their whole evolution. He has also more than any one else connected their characteristic details with tribal memories. In taking his stand on the novel ground of ethnography, he has extended the scope of the discussion and offered a wider basis for interpretation.

Several of the ideas which he has let fall in passing might disappear without leaving an appreciable gap. The fusion of the various elements of population was, according to him, accomplished very early, and the complete unity of the whole secured from a remote epoch. However strong it may be, this conviction would give rise to many objections and reservations, but it is not an integral part of his views on the occupational origin of the caste. The same may be said of the etymological deductions and legendary material in which he thinks

he can discern from its beginning the history of many castes at the precise moment when they broke off in successive swarms from the original tribes. This part of the work is more remarkable for variety of information and brilliance of treatment than for strictness of method.

Nesfield has perhaps studied caste too much from its external and present aspect. He has started from everyday experience, a proceeding which has its advantages, but also its dangers. His theory has taken such hold of his mind that he has naturally been led to present it to us as a deductive exposition rather than to demonstrate it step by step. Will he convert many students to a point of view in which a special historical phenomenon is held to be derived from deductions of a purely general character ?

In attributing primary importance, on the one hand, to the occupation and, on the other, to the organization of the tribe, he has at least faithfully summed up the impression we gather from the works of most observers of contemporary Indian life. All are struck by that confusion of more or less extensive ethnical groups, of which I have tried to give some idea, and whose complicated and mobile nature must not be lost to sight. All perceive them in infinite gradations approximating somewhat narrowly to the type of the caste, and to an increasing degree as common occupation

was more completely substituted for the bond of origin. Naturally, these two aspects colour their theoretic conclusions.

Ibbetson's thesis, less complete, and, if I may venture to say so, less forced than that of Nesfield, is based on the same data.¹ Endowed with a mind less systematic and more readily impressed by shades so changeable as to discourage generalizations, he is beset with reservations.

He nevertheless summarizes in the following words the stages which he discerns in the history of the caste : (1) the organization of the tribe, common to all primitive societies ; (2) the guilds founded on heredity of occupation ; (3) the exaltation, peculiar to India, of the sacerdotal function ; (4) the exaltation of Levitical blood by the importance attributed to heredity ; (5) the consolidation of the principle by the elaboration of a series of entirely artificial laws, derived from Hindu beliefs, regulating marriage and fixing the limits within which it may be contracted, declaring certain occupations and foods to be impure, and determining the conditions and extent of the relations permitted between the castes.

We see what importance is again attributed here to occupation and the constitution of the tribe ; but this time the role of the Brahmans is reversed. Eager to consolidate a power which was at first

¹ Ibbetson, *op. laud.*, § 341, etc.

founded on their religious learning, but for which this basis was becoming too fragile, they found, according to Ibbetson, in the division of the people into tribes, and the theory of the heredity of occupation which had arisen therefrom, an invaluable suggestion of which they took full advantage. From it they derived that network of restrictions and inhibitions which beset a high-caste Hindu from birth.¹ The Brahmans are thus represented as contributing to the spontaneous organization of the country.

This system may appear more logical than that of Nesfield, but it proceeds perhaps in an even higher degree from a wholly gratuitous conjecture unsupported by a shadow of proof. And what are we to say of this conception of the most essential and characteristic rules of the caste? It regards them, with all their strictness and the absolute sway which they exercise over conscience, as nothing more than an artificial invention of late growth, calculated to further party interests!

The real weakness of the system is shown by the inordinate importance attributed by Ibbetson—who agrees with Nesfield on this point—to community of occupation. If this really constituted the primitive bond of the caste, the latter would have shown less tendency to split up and dis-

¹ *Ibid.*, § 212.

integrate ; the medium which originally united it would have maintained its cohesion.

Experience shows, on the contrary, how caste-prejudices hold apart people who should be united by the same occupation carried on in the same place.¹ We have seen what a variety of occupations may separate members of the same caste, and this not only in the lower classes, but even in the highest. Nowhere is the abandonment of the dominant profession sufficient in itself to cause exclusion. Occupations are graded according to the degree of respect which they inspire, but the degrees are fixed by conceptions of religious purity. All trades not involving pollution, or at least enhancement of impurity, are open to every caste. Nesfield himself states ² that Brahmans may be found carrying on all trades 'except those which would entail ceremonial pollution and consequent loss of caste'. If the most despised castes multiply themselves into new sections who look down upon the primitive stock, it is not because these adopt a different profession, but merely because they renounce a certain detail of their hereditary occupations which, according to current prejudice, entails pollution. Certain groups of sweepers are in this position.³

It is true that many castes render a kind of

¹ Ibbetson, § 568.

² Nesfield, 133 ; cf. also § 183.

³ Ibbetson, § 154.

worship to the implements proper to their trade.¹ The fisherman sacrifices a goat to his new boat ; the shepherd smears the tail and horns of his beasts with ochre ; the ploughman pours an offering of sugar mixed with melted butter and a few grains of rice over his plough at the spot where it breaks up the first sod of earth ; the artisan worships his tools ; the warrior worships his weapons of war ; the scribe does homage to his pen and inkstand. Interesting as these customs are, they only go to prove that people of a single caste, being engaged in a variety of occupations, may render this sort of respect to symbols of the most diverse kinds.

Many castes take their name from their dominant occupation ; but this only refers to a generic denomination, the application of which does not at all necessarily correspond to the limits of the caste. Baniā (merchant) is, like Brahman or Kshatriya, a designation in which it would be very incorrect to see the name of a caste ; to do so would be to unite in a single province a number of groups which, having neither the right to intermarry nor to eat together, themselves form distinct castes.² Agricultural castes are numbered by dozens in a single district, and the Kāyasths, or scribes, of Bengal, in spite of a common professional name, are really divided into

¹ Nesfield, § 161.

² Ibbetson, §§ 532-3.

as many castes, distinguished by geographical or patronymic names, as there exist among them endogamous groups with particular usages and special jurisdiction. It is the same everywhere.

It may be that in certain cases a local professional title embraces a group wholly united in one single caste. This will be the exception. The bond of occupation is extremely frail, and its unity is broken by the slightest accident. It certainly does not constitute the pivot of the caste.

As the outcome of speciality of occupation, it would be no more than a guild like those of the Middle Ages or of the Roman world. Who could confuse the two institutions? The one is confined solely to artisans, enclosed within regular limits and confined in its action to the economic functions for which it was created by necessity or interest; the other permeates the whole social state, regulating the duties of all and governing private life down to its most intimate functions. There is nothing more simple and natural than that castes and guilds should meet at certain points, for both are corporations. No one denies that community of occupation has contributed to bring together or limit certain castes of workmen or artisans. We may sometimes see individuals drawn into the orbit of a new caste, and new sections evolving under the influence of

occupation.¹ How many other factors have exercised a parallel and analogous influence !

In certain Slavonic countries, in Russia and elsewhere,² there exist—or at least there still existed down to a recent date—village-communities devoted exclusively to a single occupation : villages of shoemakers and of blacksmiths or curriers, communities of joiners and of potters, even of fowlers and beggars. Now these villages are not assemblies of artisans who have merged themselves into a community, but communities which pursue a single industry. It is not occupation which results in grouping, but grouping which results in community of occupation, and has suggested it. Why should it not be the same in India ?

To grant to community of trade a place among the motive-forces active in shaping the destiny of the caste is a very different matter from claiming it to be the all-sufficient origin of the system. The first proposition is obviously as reasonable as the second is inadmissible.

A Hindu judge, endowed with a lively sense of the situation with which he is in familiar contact (Guru Proshad Sen ³), desiring to summarize the permanent traits of the caste, has left occupation completely out of account. The essence of the

¹ Nesfield, §§ 158–9.

² Hearn, *Aryan Household*, pp. 241–2.

³ *Calcutta Review*, July 1890, pp. 49 et seq.

caste must surely be found in those rules which, strictly observed, assure its perpetuity, and, when even slightly violated, entail degradation for the individual and dissolution for the community. Between these rules and occupations there is no connexion, or only an indirect one operating through the medium of scruples of purity. The soul of the caste is elsewhere.



III. RACE AS THE BASIS OF CASTE. RISLEY

IT is in race, and the enmities born of race, that Risley, here in direct contradiction to Nesfield, seeks the soul of caste. According to him the existing hierarchy is the social consecration of the ethnological ladder from the Āryans, who have retained their purity in the highest castes, down to the humblest aboriginals herded together in the lowest. Race is now substituted for profession as the generating principle. 'The nasal index' is the formula for the proportions of the nose, and is, it appears, the most unerring criterion of race. Risley ends by making the following somewhat singular assertion: 'It is scarcely a paradox to lay down as a law of the caste-organization in Eastern India that a man's social status varies in inverse ratio to the width of his nose.'¹ Who among his readers would not be a little sceptical?

I do not pretend to discuss Risley's measurements and classifications. It must at any rate be admitted that up to the present the theories claiming to sum up the ethnographical position in India

¹ Risley, *Ethnogr. Gloss.*, p. xxxiv.

have become inextricably entangled in contradictions and difficulties. There is plenty to inspire mistrust on the part of the ignorant ; so perfect an agreement, given the profound and quite accidental interminglings of so many elements—and Risley recognizes them himself—would certainly seem miraculous. Nesfield is no less decisive concerning the strict agreement which he discovers between social status and the supposed sequence of industrial evolution. By what miracle could the two principles, sprung from two absolutely different sources, be so perfectly adjusted ? I leave them at grips, and can the better do so since neither the one nor the other of these principles as expounded by their able advocates really involves the fundamental problem ; they affect not so much the origin of castes as the discipline of their hierarchy.

Risley, basing his argument upon the early use of the word *varṇa* and the meaning generally attributed to it in the more modern classical language, sees in the natural enmity between the conquering and conquered races, the white and the black, the germ of a distinction. The endogamous laws are the foundation of the system. He supposes that the Āryans, in face of a despised population, raised this rampart to protect the purity of blood on which they prided themselves. The caste is, for Nesfield, a matter of profession ;

for Risley, a matter of marriage. He believes that it is the analogy and imitation of this primitive grouping which, spreading step by step with the authority lent by the sanction of the governing classes, multiplied *ad infinitum* the ramifications which were derived according to circumstances from various causes or occasions, such as community of language, proximity or identity of occupation, beliefs or social conventions.

He arrives indirectly at a fairly general acceptance of the orthodox Brahmanic system :¹ he supposes that the predominance gradually acquired by the priesthood was the principal source of the whole evolution.² Despite its exaggerated simplification, the theory of mixed castes remains for him³ an invaluable proof of incessant cross-breeding ; he regards the fluctuating intermixture of the populations as the main cause of the multiplication of groups.

If in its strictness the endogamous rule of the caste belongs properly to India, the exogamous rules, which work on parallel lines, are much more general. In unequal degrees and varying forms exogamy is a universal law. Exogamous groups are met with under different names at the top and at the bottom of Hindu society : eponymous *gotras* among the Brahmans, clans united by the totem

¹ Risley, pp. xxxiv et seq.

² Art. *Brāhman*, at the beginning.

³ Risley, pp. xviii, xxxvi-xxxvii.

among the aboriginal peoples meet, strengthen one another, and sometimes merge together. The lower classes are always jealous to assimilate their old organization to that Brahmanic legislation, the adoption of which confers on them a title of nobility.

On this point we recognize in Risley, as in Nesfield, a lively sense of the influence which the traditions and customs of the aboriginal tribes have exerted on the final condition of the castes. While, however, they agree to derive a number of castes from the successive dismemberment of small autonomous peoples, the part which each of them assigns to the institutions of the tribe, and more specifically of the aboriginal tribe, is singularly unequal: Nesfield sees in them the original source of several of the laws which govern caste—for example, the endogamous rule; Risley sees in them nothing more than curious analogies to the customs which the Āryan element has furnished, such as exogamous restrictions; but such universal facts cease to have any significance.

Over-timid theories which dare not emancipate themselves from Hindu tradition are ineffectual, and we must distrust no less those which are too vague and comprehensive. If community of occupation sufficed to found the caste-system, it should prevail in many other countries besides India. This objection stares us in the face. It condemns

no less obviously the system which is content, without historical sequence or absolute certainty, to point to caste-laws as a survival of the ancient organization of the tribe or of the clan.

The organization is so natural to the archaic periods of human society that it is to be met with among most diverse races; if we turn to its general traits, therefore, we are left in complete uncertainty and can prove nothing. If we think solely or even chiefly of the organization of the aboriginal tribes of India, and if we admit that it has reacted with so decisive a force on the general constitution of the Hindu world that an ambitious class of priests have taken possession of it and made it a weapon of war, we shall reverse the probable current of history and attribute too great a power to the motive forces. Everything indicates that in the march of Indian civilization the determining influence belongs to the Āryan elements, the aboriginal elements having exerted no more than a modifying, partial, and secondary one.

Does this mean that this comparison of the caste and the tribe is fruitless? I see in it, on the contrary, a new idea of capital importance, but only if the facts are closely examined and we are not so dazzled by convenient generalities as to lose sight of the necessary sequence of historical realities. This condition makes it unnecessary for

me to enter fully into the speculations on caste which have arisen from recent researches on primitive juridical organization. Even those which have been wisely confined to the Āryan domain,¹ being too summary, have scarcely entered into the living reality of evolution. We shall occasionally profit by them, but we have had some concrete experience of the danger of over-abstract theories.

Caste exists only in India. It is therefore in the situation peculiar to India that we must seek its explanation. Without shutting our eyes to other sources of information we must turn to the facts themselves and to the study of the characteristic elements of the system as they are revealed in the present and reconstructed in the past by the light of observation.



¹ I am thinking, for example, of Hearn, *The Āryan Household*.

IV. CASTE AND THE ĀRYAN CONSTITUTION OF THE FAMILY

THE caste is the framework of the whole Brahmanic organization. In order to become Brahmans, the aboriginal peoples form themselves into castes and accept the strict caste-rules ; this phenomenon goes back to very early times. Now Brahmanism may have adopted foreign elements, and it may, in the course of history, have been subject to external influences ; but, generally speaking, it remains in India the representative of Āryan tradition. Without in any way excluding the possibility of subsidiary influences, we are justified in first seeking Āryan sources for an institution which appears to us so intimately bound up with Brahmanic doctrine and life.

The history of the old Āryan societies rests on the evolution, which varies according to locality, of the ancient family-constitution, so far as we can divine its character by a comparison of the traits scattered throughout the various branches of the race.

By the idea of relationship which permeates caste ; by the jurisdiction which somewhat

tyrannically regulates private life, marriage, food, ceremonial usages ; by the habitual practice of certain special cults, and by its corporate organization, the caste-system does in fact recall the family-group such as we observe it in its various degrees in the family, in the *gens*, and in the tribe. Its original features are no less clearly defined. There is scarcely a single feature, however, which, if examined closely, will not reveal germs of this past, although the common elements may not elsewhere have developed either on the same lines or with the same degree of diffusion. Fundamentally it is the same phenomenon of which India gives us so many other examples. In almost all matters which provoke comparison with cognate branches of the Āryan stock, we meet with the most exact resemblances hand in hand with profound differences. The relationship penetrates even to those elements which have evidently been shaped here in a new mould.

Amongst the rules which govern marriage in the caste, the exogamous laws which prohibit any union between people belonging to the same section, *gotras*, or clans, are remarkably strict. In all primitive societies they have exercised a wide dominion, which soon decreased wherever a more advanced political constitution flourished. In principle these rules were certainly familiar to the Āryan race as well as to others. According to

Plutarch's evidence,¹ the Romans of the early period never married women of their own blood, and indeed among the matrons known to us we do not find one bearing the same family (gentilitial) name as her husband. The *gotra* is peculiar to the Brahmans, but its role is certainly an ancient one. The exogamous rule undoubtedly goes back to the most remote past of the immigrants. It is so definitely primitive under this form of the *gotra* that it is antecedent to the caste, the limits of which it exceeds; for the same *gotras* are found in a multitude of different castes. The caste-system has therefore been superadded to it, and the two institutions, incompletely merged, are not inherently bound together. This is precisely what happened at Athens when the establishment of the 'demes' assigned to different districts families belonging to a single *gens* (γένος).

It is the endogamous law which strikes us most, the law which only authorizes marriage between betrothed of the same caste. It is scarcely less widespread than the exogamous law in the primitive phases of human societies; it has not only left very obvious traces among the Āryan peoples, but is there bound up with a whole world of fact and sentiment which bespeaks its origin.

In Athens, at the time of Demosthenes, it was

¹ Cf. Kovalevsky, *Famille et Propriété primitives*, pp. 19 et seq.

necessary, in order to become a member of a phratry, to be the offspring of a legitimate marriage in one of the families composing it. In Greece, Rome, and Germany the laws or customs only granted the sanction of legal marriage to a union contracted with a woman of equal rank, i.e. a free citizeness.¹

Every one remembers the struggle that the Roman plebeians had to wage for centuries in order to win the *jus connubii*, or the right to marry patrician women. It is generally regarded as a political conflict between rival classes, but it hides something quite different. It was more in the cause of a sacred right than of any pride of nobility that the pure-bred patrician 'gentes', who faithfully upheld their ancient religion, rejected alliance with impure plebeians who were mixed in origin and destitute of family-rites. The patricians obeyed the same scruple which is inspired to-day in a new setting by the endogamous law of the caste. Under the caste-system, however, it becomes increasingly severe and restricted in India. The struggle of the classes in Rome, under a political system, lowered the barriers and soon widened the circle so as to admit indiscriminately the whole category of citizens. Up to this point, and even in such opposed conditions, the analogy may be pursued to a surprising length. The

¹ Cf. Hearn, op. laud., pp. 156-7.

connubium went beyond the city ; it was granted successively to several friendly peoples. Is this not, *mutatis mutandis*, the counterpart of what happens in India when caste-sections accept or refuse marriage with other sections, and when the limits vary according to place and circumstance with a facility which seems completely to break down the strictness of the general precepts ? The drawing of this parallel is somewhat belated, but it seems to suggest a common source for two streams whose course is otherwise widely divergent—the Hindu caste and the Roman city.

Even in theory a man of higher caste may marry women of lower caste. It was the same in Rome and Athens ; the duty of marrying a woman of equal rank did not exclude unions with women of inferior stock—foreigners or freedwomen. The case of the Śūdra woman is precisely the same in the Hindu family. She is excluded in theory, though not in practice, but she cannot give birth to children who are the equals of their father, since there rises between husband and wife the eternal barrier of religious inequality.

According to Manu,¹ the gods will not eat an offering prepared by a Śūdra woman. In Rome the presence of a foreigner at the sacrifice of the *gens* was sufficient to offend the gods.² The Śūdra woman is a foreigner ; she does not belong to the

¹ III, 18.

² Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité Antique*, p. 117.

race which by the investiture of the sacred thread is born into the fullness of the religious life. Even if it is lawful for the high castes to marry a Śūdra woman, in addition to the legitimate wife possessed of full rights, yet the union must be celebrated without the customary prayers.¹ In the Āryan conception of marriage, husband and wife form the sacrificing couple attached to the family altar of the hearth. This common conception forms the basis of the endogamy of the Hindu caste and the limitations imposed on the family in classical antiquity.

It is forbidden to eat with people of another caste and to consume food prepared by those of a lower order. This is one of the anomalies which puzzle but do not baffle us. We must remember the religious role which from time immemorial the Āryans have assigned to the repast.² Prepared on the sacred hearth, it is the external symbol of the family-community, of its continuity in the past and in the present ; and this aspect gives rise to the libations and, in India, to the daily offerings to ancestors. Even where, owing to the decay inevitable in all institutions, the primitive significance may have weakened, it remains very much alive in the funeral feast (the *perideipnon* of the Greeks, the *silicernium* of the Romans) which on

¹ *Indische Studien*, X, p. 21.

² Hearn, p. 32 ; Fustel de Coulanges, p. 182.

the occasion of the death of relations manifests the indissoluble unity of the line.¹

There are abundant proofs that the repast has kept a religious meaning for the Hindus. The Brahman avoids eating at the same time or out of the same vessel not only with a stranger or an inferior, but even with his own wife and his yet uninitiated sons.² This is so definitely a matter of religious scruple that it is forbidden to share the food even of a Brahman, if, for some cause or another, although accidental and involuntary, he is suffering from a defilement.³ Even a Śūdra cannot without contamination eat the meal of a defiled *dvija*.

Impurity is contagious, and therefore excludes its victim from the religious function of the repast, and for this reason it is that by sitting down to a common banquet with his caste-companions an offender who has been temporarily excluded consecrates his rehabilitation. In virtue of the same principle, the spouses in the solemn marriage of the Romans shared a cake before the sacred fire, which was an essential ceremony marking the adoption of the wife into the family-religion of her husband. This should not be regarded as a singular or unrelated fact ; it has

¹ Leist, *Altarisches Jus Civile*, pp. 201 et seq.

² *Mānava Dh. Ś.*, IV, 43 ; *Āpast. Dh. S.*, II, 4, 9, 7, and the note by Bühler.

³ *Vishṇu Smṛiti*, XXII, 8-10.

actually been said that in the worship which united the curia or the phratry the most significant religious act was the taking of the meal.¹ The Roman feasts of the Charistia, which gathered kinsmen together, excluded not merely all strangers but any relation whose conduct appeared to render him unworthy.² The Persians had retained similar usages.³ The daily repasts of the prytanes had remained among the Greeks one of the official rites of the city religion, where, moreover, the composition of the meal was not a matter of indifference, the nature of the dishes and the kind of wine to be served being defined by rules which varied with the locality. In excluding various foods, India may have generalized the application of the principle, but she did not invent it, for this too has in the common past its analogies and its germ.

It is a remarkable thing that the Hindus, who have in other respects preserved more faithfully than any one else the significance of the common meal, and have to all appearance extended it, should, more than other peoples, have departed from the primitive type in the liturgical form of the funeral feast, *Śrāddha*. The banquet, according to theory, instead of bringing the relations together, is offered to Brahmans. But they are

¹ Fustel de Coulanges, p. 135.

² Leist, *Altarisches Jus Civile*, pp. 49-50, 263-4.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50, 263-4.

regarded as representatives of the ancestors and receive food in their name. Further, the Brahman who offers the sacrifice must, symbolically at least, join in the feast with the people, as was the practice among their ancestors. In spite of new conceptions which may have been introduced into it by the more highly developed ritual, this is certainly the ideal prolongation of the family-repast.

The invited Brahmans must be chosen with a care which recalls the law of purity imposed on primitive guests. If Brahmans are substituted for relations, the novelty is sufficiently explained by the encroachment of sacerdotal power.¹ Commentators similarly assert that even the acquittal of a murder case, shall be turned to the profit of the Brahmans.² In the Āryan past, however, it was undoubtedly paid to the family of the deceased. The insistence shown by the law-books on reserving the *śrāddhas* for the Brahmans³ betrays the tendency which they follow. But there is always a place reserved for the relations.⁴ What clearly emerges from these very restrictions is that in current practice the *śrāddhas* were the occasion of actual common meals. The Hindus hold various kinds which are in no way connected with funerals.⁵

¹ Leist, *Altarisches Jus Gentium*, p. 205.

² Hopkins, *Journ. Amer. Orient. Soc.*, XIII, p. 113.

³ *Mānava Dh. Ś.*, III, 139 et seq.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 148.

⁵ *Ibid.*, III, 254.

Some purificatory *śrāddhas* (*goshthi-śrāddha*) seem to be the ritualistic reflection of feasts celebrating the readmission of an offending member. In incorporating them in the series it was remembered that they were intimately related by their significance to the ancient family-repast.

Its consecration is derived from the sanctity of the domestic fire. In Roman antiquity expulsion from the religious and civil community was expressed by 'deprivation of fire', but also, at the same time, by 'deprivation of water'. It seems likewise in India¹ that contact with a strange fire and polluted water renders particularly impure the food offered or prepared by an unworthy hand. I have said that some of the higher castes accept parched grain from certain lower castes, but on condition that it contains no admixture of water; ² and that some Hindus, who would take pure milk from certain Muslims, would reject it with indignation if they thought that water had been added. In the rites which accompany expulsion from the caste the offender's jar is filled with water and a slave upsets it, uttering the formula: 'I deprive so-and-so of water.'³ We see that these ideas have remote connexions and curious analogies in Aryan life, and at the same time explain why certain texts

¹ Nesfield, §§ 189-90.

² Ibid., § 82.

³ *Gautama Dh. S.*, XX, 2 et seq.

dating back to the early period of sacerdotal literature place on an equal footing admission to community of water and to the *connubium*.¹

The meaning of the common meal and its correlated prohibitions is so strongly marked in the life of the people that it strikes the contemporary observer who is free from all archaeological bias. 'Community of food,' says Ibbetson, 'is formally used as an outward and visible token of community of blood.'² Kinsmen gather around the same table.

It is the same principle conversely applied which forbids participation in the same meal, and in a more general way all contact between people who have no share in the same family rites. This tradition has left traces elsewhere than in India. The *jus osculi*, contact by embrace, is a sign of kinship.³ Here too, then, the germ is ancient. Even the impurity of a corpse is no doubt partly explained by the consideration that the deceased is necessarily excluded from the rites by death. It places him therefore outside the family; his contact and presence defile the relatives in the same way as would an outcast.⁴ We must not forget that exclusion from caste is by the very nature of the ceremonial likened to death; in both cases a funeral is celebrated. The impurity from

¹ *Indische Studien*, X, pp. 77-8.

² Ibbetson, p. 185.

³ Cf. Leist, *Altarisches Jus Civile*, pp. 49-50, 261.

⁴ Leist, *Græco-Ital. Rechtsgesch.*, pp. 34 et seq.

which the relatives suffer during the days of mourning is a conception common to all Āryan antiquity. Impurity is transmitted by near approach ; and from the man it extends to the woman and to the servant. All contact which pollutes must therefore be carefully avoided, as well as all intercourse with people who, if they do not fall under the misfortune of accidental defilement, are impure from the fact that they do not belong to the community of the same fire and water. The development of this law in the caste is perfectly logical.

The very tribunal of the caste, with its limited jurisdiction, does not lack in antecedents. The family of antiquity had a council, which in Rome, Greece, and Germany surrounded and assisted the father on grave occasions, notably when an offending son was to be tried.¹ Exclusion from the family is the counterpart of exclusion from the caste. In both cases it is equivalent to an excommunication, which in its most redoubtable form is expressed in Latin by the qualification *sacer*.² Among the Romans it created a religious and civil situation very much like that of the out-cast, the Hindu *patita*. The Latin *gens* possessed a chief who tried litigious cases among his own people. In the same way as the caste, the *gentes*

¹ Leist, *Altarisches Jus Civile*, pp. 273 et seq. ; Kovalevsky, *Famille et Propriété primitives*, pp. 119 et seq.

² Leist, *Græco-Ital. Rechtsgesch.*, p. 319, al.

took decisions which were respected by the city,¹ and like the castes they obeyed particular usages which were incumbent on their members.²

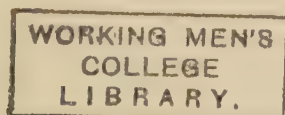
On the other hand, certain Vedic families are distinguished by given ceremonies and by a predilection for certain divinities,³ in which there seems to survive the religious peculiarity that reserves to the classic family—to the *gens*—special cults and exclusive rites.

Although in several cases the worship of a common ancestor or of a recognized patron in India recalls the Graeco-Roman worship of eponymous heroes, it cannot be said that this is a prominent feature of the caste. Religious individualism here, thanks to the more liberal course of speculation, has made an advance, which has elsewhere been impeded by the advent of a political constitution definitely opposed to all religious innovation. Religion in India has been free to localize itself, to split up *ad infinitum*, and on occasion to mobilize with a liberty unknown in classical societies. It is chiefly in practice, and in usages directly inspired by very ancient conceptions, that the continuity of tradition manifests itself in the heart of the caste.

¹ Fustel de Coulanges, *La Cité Antique*, pp. 118–19.

² Max Müller cited by Hearn, *op. laud.*, p. 121; *Indische Studien*, X, pp. 88 et seq.

³ Becker-Marquardt, *Röm. Alterth.*, II, p. 49.



V. GENESIS OF THE HINDU CASTES

WE have reached the crux of this research. The comparisons which I have just drawn have been for the most part already recognized and pointed out. They are no more than indications and examples, which it would be easy to multiply. The essential thing is to weigh their significance.

Everything brings us back to the elements of the old family constitution ; the true name of the caste is *jāti*, which means ' race '. Here again we must be precise. The family was not the only social organism at the time when the Āryans of India separated in order to follow their own destinies. It was included in larger bodies : in the clan and the tribe. Its existence is certain, although it is not easy strictly to define the facts, which are variable and doubtful.

The reciprocal relationship of different groups and the order in which they were formed have been somewhat confusedly discussed. It is sufficient that these concentric circles, which embrace a wider and wider area, are in the Āryan world conceived upon a common type, for us to be able to consider the clan and the tribe, whatever

names they may take in different countries, as no more than an expansion of the family, the organization of which they copy and extend.¹ Their genealogy is at bottom of little importance to us ; the fact is that their respective constitutions are strictly analogous : in speaking of the family constitution it is, by the same token, the constitution of the tribe and of the clan which I have in mind.

The terms here correspond very adequately : *gens*, *curia*, tribe in Rome ; family, *phratría*, *phylē* in Greece ; family, *gotra*, caste in India. The general harmony is striking and all the more instructive since in the beginning, to judge by all the analogies, the most essential difference between the clan and the tribe, as between the section and the caste, is summed up in the fact that the more restricted group is exogamous while the larger is endogamous. Even at the somewhat late epoch when the classical countries are well known to us, political organization has merely undermined or displaced certain customs ; it has, for example, substituted as regards the rule of endogamy the whole city for the mere tribe. If there is anything to cause surprise, it is the fact that the guiding principles have on both sides so obviously survived the separation, which even then was already ancient, of the ethnical branches wherein we trace their destiny.

¹ Hearn, pp. 136 et seq. ; Leist, *Altarisches Jus Civile*, pp. 45, 82-3.

It can be neither by chance nor by some modern revival that caste precisely covers the whole domain of the old gentile law. Still less is it by chance that its most peculiar practices are exactly related to primitive ideas, the spirit of which they keep alive. The whole is complete, perfectly consistent, and closely welded to the past, and this in a matter which exercises supreme dominion over life and its most intimate concerns. It is therefore an organic institution drawing its vitality from very deep sources.

The guilds of the Middle Ages remind us in some of their customs of certain similar features in antique organizations. Yet who would venture to claim that the former are the direct heirs of the latter? Customs which had only survived the domination of an entirely new set of morals and ideas at the cost of losing their real identity and significance in the public mind, gradually crept back. I am willing to admit the patronage of a saint to be the reflection in the guilds of the eponymy of the ancient heroes, and the meals, which on certain solemn days brought their members together, to be a relic of the family meal. Yet there is from the one type to the other no continuity of transmission or immediate derivation. Nothing in the guilds corresponds to the solid cohesion of the family-corporation. They are not only open to all comers, provided that the

requisite conditions are fulfilled, but they furthermore impose no restrictions on the civil and private life of their members. The resemblances then are to some extent accidental and fragmentary. It is possible that the repasts which in our country still gather the relations and friends of the deceased together after a burial are not unconnected with the funeral feasts of antiquity. What does it matter if in its long journey the usage has lost its original significance ?

The relationship which binds the caste to the ancient system of the family-community is of quite another order. There is between the two a genuine continuity and direct transmission of vitality.

Does this mean that India has simply preserved a primitive type of the Āryan constitution ? Such is certainly not my belief. If caste emerged in India from common Āryan premises, there resulted in the classical countries a quite different system. The caste, however, has remained thoroughly impregnated with ideas which connect it with the Āryan background. They could hardly fail to develop into an original institution, transplanted as they were to such unique conditions in India. Their aspect has been so greatly altered that at first sight the most primitive types are unrecognizable in the caste. Caste is, however, their legitimate heir. We have accomplished nothing if

we have failed to grasp the mechanism of this transformation.

The Vedic hymns are all too indefinite concerning the details of external and social life. We at least see from them that the Āryan population was divided into a number of tribes or small peoples (*janas*), subdivided into clans united by the ties of kinship (*viśas*), which in their turn were split up into families. The terminology of the R̥g-Veda is in this respect somewhat indecisive, but the general fact is clear.¹ *Sajāta*, that is to say, 'kinsman' or 'fellow in *jāti*' of race seems in the Atharva-Veda to denote fellow in clan (*viś*). *Jana*, which assumes a wider significance, recalls the Avestic equivalent of the clan, the *zantu*, and the *jāti* or caste. A series of terms, *vrā*, *vr̥ijana*, *vrāja*, *vrāta*, appear to be synonyms or subdivisions either of the clan or of the tribe. The Āryan population then lived at the epoch to which the hymns refer under the rule of an organization dominated by the traditions of the tribe and the lower or similar groupings. The very variety of names indicates that this organization was somewhat unsettled; it was all the more easily shaped into the definite forms that circumstances were to impose on it in India.

It is easy to discern many of the factors which

¹ Cf. Zimmer, *Altind., Leben*, pp. 158 et seq.

have contributed, each in its own way, to direct its development.

From stern necessity the life of the invaders remained during the course of their slow conquest, if not nomadic, at least far from settled. We can follow the wanderings of some tribes ; this mobility was very unfavourable to the organization of a political constitution, but very favourable to the maintenance of old institutions. The hazards of local struggles, moreover, could not fail to react on the state of the tribes, which in many instances were broken up. While preserving the tradition of hereditary customs, the fragments were reconstituted under the action of necessity and new interests, topographical or otherwise. The exclusive rigour of the genealogical bond must have been somewhat impaired by this. The way was open to diversified principles of grouping.

An Eastern people is rarely settled with the firmness which we are accustomed to see in the West, a fact for which the absence of a strongly constituted state is both cause and effect by turn. India has preserved down to our own times something of this mobility. From time immemorial there have been very few towns there ; it is natural that in the early period we should discern scarcely any traces of them. Even later, the great capitals which were founded had no deep roots, and often enjoyed but an ephemeral existence.

The village, the *grāma*, is almost the only setting of Hindu life from the Vedic hymns down to the present time. As it appears in the hymns, it is pastoral rather than agricultural. Synonyms like *vrijana*, which cannot be separated from *vraja*, 'pasturage', suggest the same idea. The word 'gotra' also is never employed in the R̥ig-Veda, except in the etymological sense of 'cow-shed'. If, however, we see it later regularly denoting the eponymous clan, this use is indubitably ancient. The R̥ig-Veda makes no allusion to it at all, which merely proves once more what a dangerous delusion it is to draw positive conclusions from the silence of the hymns. This application of the word is only justified, moreover, by an intermediate stage. Very closely related to *vrijana* by its original meaning, it must have passed through an analogous evolution; it too must have been a synonym at least approximate to *grāma* or village.

The Hindu village has an autonomous life of its own. In several regions it is a real community and its territory common property, an organization which has afforded frequent parallels with the Slavonic village-communities. We have been led to consider the village as the equivalent of the primitive clan; but in the village the community of blood, of possessions, and of jurisdiction was probably established on a more definite basis. I

cannot determine whether the village-communities in India are everywhere of ancient origin, or whether they have not, in a great many cases and under the influence of special conditions, accidentally reconstituted a primitive social type. They bear witness, at any rate, to a powerful tradition of corporate life. At the same time there exists over a vast area that system of family-communities (joint families) where several generations are grouped in joint possession under a patriarchal authority. This system shows a spirit of obstinate conservatism with regard to old institutions.

There are yet other facts: I have spoken of those Russian villages where community of property and proximity on the same soil have resulted in community of profession. The same thing has occurred in India; we cannot doubt this when we remember the numerous villages of potters, curriers, blacksmiths, etc., to which literature, above all Buddhistic literature, makes such frequent allusions. Community of trade may have spread in this way all the more readily if a blood-bond originally united the inhabitants of the village. Now there are incessant references to villages of Brahmans. This must mean that the groupings are governed, often, at any rate, by relationship, for with the Brahman relationship and not identity of profession was unquestionably the essential thing. They lived infinitely less by

their ritual functions than by agricultural and above all pastoral pursuits. This, however, does not exclude the possibility that by a superficial analogy their example may have encouraged community of trade in less noble and respected groups round about them.

Thus the bulk of Āryan immigrants settled in enclosed villages, and dominated more or less by an idea of real or supposed relationship, in any event formed a corporate body in which the clan survived in a modified form. The more general this organization was, the more must it in addition have imposed a corresponding constitution on the trade-corporations themselves. Few in number and little specialized in the pastoral period, these corporations were bound to grow by reason of economic development and the progress of culture. The members of mechanical professions whose services were needed by other groups and corporations could only ensure for themselves a tolerable existence by adapting themselves to the common type.

At this point religious considerations intervene. Scruples of purity did not permit the inhabitants of Āryan villages to follow certain professions, nor even to receive into their fellowship compatriots who followed them. Among those excluded, the same fastidiousness tended to multiply barriers by establishing a scale of impurity among various

trades. Religious sentiment made these barriers the more impassable in proportion as it was more vigorously upheld, and Brahmanic supremacy worked to this end with extraordinary energy and perseverance. We may admit that the supremacy of the sacerdotal class was not established in the beginning without conflict, but its foundations were certainly laid very early. From the most remote periods of literature its claims are asserted in high-flown terms.

Class-hierarchy could not create the whole caste-system, which derives from a more spontaneous partition and corresponds to a far more minute subdivision, but it played its part therein. It had set the example and custom of a subdivision, which, though more extensive, was in certain respects scarcely less rigorously maintained. Above all, it had two indirect consequences : by the domination it claimed for the Brahmans it preserved a rigidity concerning religious scruples which was reflected in the severity of the caste-rules ; it served as a basis for that hierarchy which has become an integral part of the system, and facilitated its establishment by lending peculiar force to the ideas of purity which, generally speaking, determine the levels of the social scale.

The triumphant theocracy which crystallized the rules of caste in their systematized form sprang from those very elements from which the caste

directly derived its origin and the source of its being. Thus it is that the hierarchy of the castes, determined by the Brahmans, or at least inspired and maintained by them, was enabled to oust the earlier state, thus reabsorbing the looser organization of the classes.

In classical antiquity the slow fusion of the classes is at once the stimulant and the result of civil and political ideas. In India the theocratic power blocks all evolution in this direction ; and India has never attained to the idea either of the state or of the fatherland. The sphere of interest contracts rather than expands. In the republics of antiquity the class-conception tended to develop into the wider idea of the city ; in India it grows more sharply defined, and inclines to confine itself within the narrow limits of the caste. We must not forget that the immigrants were scattered over an immense area ; groups too vast were doomed to dispersion, and in these circumstances peculiar tendencies acquired added strength.

I cannot persuade myself that the caste has sprung from the aboriginal tribe : the system was too whole-heartedly embraced by the Brahmans, who raised it to the dignity of a dogma. Other branches of the Indo-European family furnish striking analogies to all the constituent elements of caste. Some of these are all the more striking in that

the resemblance lies not so much in external similarities as in the identity of guiding principles. The aboriginal tribes, when they enter into the Brahmanic order, in spite of the ease with which their somewhat fluid organization yields to new conditions, are forced in the process to subject their organization to many modifications. For a long time they retain the stamp of their origin, and we discern the persistent traces of a foreign importation which is somewhat out of harmony with the whole, as, for example, the totem-clans. How are we to believe that the Brahmans borrowed from the vanquished, for whom they never ceased to display a humiliating contempt, those complicated rules of purity which make them so fastidious in regard both to food and to personal relations, and that they adopted so readily a social organization which had not sprung spontaneously from their own traditions?

It has sometimes been too lightly assumed that the natives were themselves in possession of this whole system.¹ They may from the start have had certain of its traits; it must, however, be remembered that we are here in danger of several misconceptions.

The imitation of Brahmanic rules has penetrated even to populations which, though otherwise still quite barbarous, manifest a great

¹ Nesfield, § 189.

eagerness to adopt them. Though they retain many unorthodox customs, they insist upon a Brahmanic clergy. While the priests are despised for the services they render, they in turn are very contemptuous of their flock ; but despite everything the patronage of the Brahmans is highly esteemed.¹ The Brahmanic rite of marriage has taken root even in tribes who do not summon Brahmans to their ceremonies.² An extremely low caste such as the Rāmośis,³ where the exogamous limit is marked by the *totem*, nevertheless owes much to the Brahmans, not merely its genealogical legend, but the prohibition of the marriage of widows. It is reversing the true order of things to attribute the authorship of such restrictions to the aborigines. In the early stages, organization and custom show obvious resemblances from race to race, the social machinery being too primitive to admit of great diversity. One must take care, however, not to confuse what is late or borrowed with what is hereditary.

Everything goes to show, however, that intercourse and intermarriage with the aborigines was not without influence in the establishing of the caste, an influence which, if indirect, was powerful. The clash of the Āryans with populations which were despised on account of their colour and their

¹ Ibbetson, pp. 153-4.

² *Poona Gazetteer*, I, pp. 410, 423.

³ *Ibid.*, § 296.

state of barbarity could not but exalt their pride of race, strengthening their native scruples with regard to degrading contacts, and redoubling the rigour of endogamous rules ; in a word, it encouraged all the practices and prejudices which paved the way for the caste. By this I mean that hierarchical exclusivism which crowns the system, and which, properly speaking, transfers it from the domain of the family to the social and semi-political domain.

The former masters of the soil, too numerous to be entirely subjugated, suffered the ascendancy of a more gifted conqueror ; but even where they completely lost their independence, they preserved in the main their native organization. They were rather converted than subdued by a centralized force ; they certainly helped to maintain throughout the country an element of instability and fluctuation. The tribes continued to jostle one another in the guise of small semi-autonomous nationalities, so that this aboriginal population raised against the development of an organized political government a formidable obstacle which has never been surmounted. Their example upheld the cause of archaic institutions, and thus in every way encouraged the survival of those conditions which prevailed when the conqueror entered the country.

The subsequent mingling of the two races could

only promote this tendency, for thereby these precedents acquired the strength of habits and hereditary instincts. Did not the old framework become consolidated as more and more laggards found their way into Hinduism? The organization of the tribe, although transformed into a system of castes under the influence of conditions which I am endeavouring to explain, was a natural enough point of contact for conquerors and conquered, given their respective states of civilization.

Nowhere in antiquity have the Indo-Europeans shown any great taste for manual professions. The Greeks and Romans left them to slaves or intermediate classes, freedmen and members of the household. The Āryans, settled in villages and at first completely pastoral in occupation, had even less need to follow them in India than elsewhere. Manual labour was destined in general to remain the lot of either the aborigines or of the peoples whose hybrid or doubtful origin relegated them to the same level.

Both these groups, in becoming artisans, brought with them their tradition and the desire to be assimilated to the analogous organization of the superior race. The fear of defilement closed a number of professions to the Āryans; this fear spread and became general among the inferior population owing to the religious influence of the immigrants and of their priests. It could not fail

to multiply amongst them sections graded according to the degrees of impurity in their occupations, a thing which is still happening to-day under our eyes. The aborigines, too numerous to sink individually to the condition of domestic slaves, and driven by circumstances into the blind alley of manual trade, were led both by their own traditions and by the influence of the Āryans to form themselves into new groups, in which the profession seemed to be the connecting link.

Thus was accentuated and completed the parallel movement among the Āryans themselves, which, though in different conditions, was inspired by several common ideas. In neither case was community of profession the bond of union, but we can readily understand how it might appear so, not only to us but, in the course of time, even to the Hindus. At this point and in the age of secondary formation, where evolution has obliterated old ideas and motive-forces, or dulled the consciousness of them, a deceptive analogy might easily have been drawn regarding the autonomous factor of grouping, which as a fact was only the last stage in its development, for it had proceeded from very different sources.

In addition to the natural play of external social or historical elements, it is necessary to take into consideration moral forces, primitive inclinations, and essential beliefs. Unfortunately it is

not easy to throw light on such subtle agents, the influence of which is continuous but indeterminate.

On some of these I have touched in passing. The Hindu mind is both religious and speculative. It jealously upholds tradition and is singularly insensible to the joys of action and the call of material progress. It offered a field for a social organization composed of extremely archaic elements, and obedient to an all-potent sacerdotal authority which regarded immutability as a duty and the established hierarchy as a natural law.

With striking aptness this system is particularly associated with the most permanent, if not the most characteristic, of the dogmas which dominate the religious life of India—namely, metempsychosis. The immobility of the limits which the caste imposes upon life is justified and explained automatically by a doctrine which founds the terrestrial condition of each individual on the balance of his previous actions, good and bad. The fate of every man is determined by the past ; in the present it must be definite and immutable. The scale of social ranks corresponds faithfully to the infinite degrees of moral good and evil.

All or nearly all the sects born of Hinduism have accepted metempsychosis as an indisputable certainty ; all or nearly all have accepted the caste without protest. Buddhism, from the point of view of religious profession, makes no difference

between the castes ; all are admitted without difficulty and without distinction into the body of monks, and all are called to salvation. Logically these premises ought to result in the suppression of castes, but such is not the case. Direct polemics develop late, and then—for example, in a book which is completely devoted to them, the *Vajrasūchī*—they take the special form of an attack directed against the privileges of the Brahmanic class. It is a struggle for influence between the two clerical orders, not a formal protest against a system outside which the Buddhists themselves could conceive no social existence.

Various ascetic sects likewise practically abolish the caste. All postulants are admitted to their religious order, where they mingle freely. With several this equality is symbolized at the time of consecration of the adepts by the solemn destruction of the sacred thread. How can the abolition of all family ties, and the renunciation of the world, be better expressed ? It is the equivalent of those funeral ceremonies which, as I have said, signify exclusion from the caste. It is not a question of overthrowing a system which is the very foundation of national life, but of the creation within this immense circle of a fairly extensive group of saints who escape from the world and break all its ties. For the bulk of adherents the caste remains unquestioned, and in a number of

cases the new community of faith helps to create new sections.

We no longer live in the days when it was permissible to represent Buddhism or Jainism as attempts at social reform directed against the caste-system.¹ The illogical resignation with which they have bowed to it shows, on the contrary, how deeply rooted it was in the Hindu conscience at the time of their foundation, and how intimately wedded to those beliefs, those fundamental ideas, such as the doctrine of moral merit, of metempsychosis and of final deliverance, which they receive without protest as their inheritance.



¹ Cf. Oldenburg, *Le Bouddha*, translated by Foucher, pp. 155 et seq.

VI. GENERAL SURVEY: THE CASTE SYSTEM AND THE HINDU MIND

FOR a long time it was believed, on the evidence of Plato and Herodotus, that Egypt must have been governed by the caste-system. This view is abandoned to-day by the best judges, and appears to be definitely contradicted by indigenous records. The Greeks, little used to vast hereditary organisms united by privilege of rank or community of function, might, when they met with more or less distinct types, easily exaggerate their importance and extent. Up to the present India alone has revealed a universal caste-system in the sense in which we have observed and defined it. At most, only accidental traces and germs of analogous institutions are found elsewhere; they are nowhere generalized or co-ordinated into a system.

In Lacedaemon and elsewhere the Greeks know several instances of hereditary functions and trades. In spite of the uncertainties which obscure their interpretation, the names borne by the four Ionic tribes (*phylai*) of Attica are certainly professional: soldiers, goatherds, artisans,¹ but they

¹ Schömann, *Griech. Alterth.*, ed. 1861, I, pp. 327 et seq.

are certainly not castes. The example proves at least that Āryan tradition could, under the influence of a favourable situation, incline towards the caste; a lesson which it is well to bear in mind.

A social institution which dominates an immense country, which is interwoven in its whole past, has necessarily more than one cause. It would be a mistake to confine it within the too precise limits of a single deduction. Such strong currents are composed of numerous tributary streams. There are many other countries where an immigrant race has found itself in juxtaposition with natives whom it has conquered and dispossessed without this situation giving birth to castes. Other peoples have known strong class-distinctions, yet the caste has remained strange to them. Theocracy fashions other settings to its purpose. The system in India must therefore result from the combined action of several factors, the most important of which I have tried to indicate.

Let us now summarize the essential points of this investigation.

We take the Āryans on their entry into India. They lived under the influence of the old laws common to all the branches of the race. They were divided into tribes, clans, and families; varying in size, the groups were all governed by corporate organizations whose general traits were

identical and whose tie was an increasingly close consanguinity. The age of equality, pure and simple, between clan and clan, tribe and tribe, was past ; military and religious prestige had begun their work. Certain groups, favoured by birth and by good fortune in war, joined to form an aristocratic class which laid claim to power. Religious rites grew in intricacy, so that special skill and technical training were necessary. A sacerdotal class was born which based its pretensions on the more or less legendary genealogies connecting its branches with illustrious sacrificers of the past. The rest of the Āryans were merged in a single category, in the midst of which the various groups operated in their own autonomy and under their own corporate laws. From the beginning religious ideas dominated the whole of life, and an already powerful priesthood now redoubled the strictness and importance of religious scruples.

The Āryans advanced into their new domain. They came into collision with a dark-skinned race of inferior civilization, whom they subdued. This antagonism, together with anxiety for their own safety and contempt for the vanquished, heightened the inherent exclusiveness of the victors and strengthened all the beliefs and prejudices which protected the purity of the sections into which they were divided. The aboriginal

population was relegated to a confused mass attached to its masters only by loose ties of subordination. The religious ideas introduced by the invaders penetrated this mass more or less deeply, but never enough to raise it to their level. But the invaders scattered, spreading over vast spaces where their settlements were hardly ever limited by any natural boundaries; and the original groups separated, weakened by the events of the struggle. The rigour of the genealogical principle which united them was in consequence compromised, and the fragments followed geographical or other considerations in the process of forming themselves anew.

Little by little the demands for a less shifting existence became insistent. A more sedentary life was established in villages engaged in pastoral and agricultural pursuits which were originally founded on a basis of kinship, for the laws of family and of the clan preserved supreme authority, and the traditional usages sanctioned by religion continued to be observed. More settled habits developed the needs and trades of a civilization which was ripe for greater expansion. The professional corporations were in their turn caught in the network, either because the village-community brought about community of occupation, or because the scattered representatives of the same profession in neighbouring districts obeyed an imperious need

by modelling themselves on the only type of organization in use around them.

In time two facts emerged: admixture, only half acknowledged, occurred between the races, and the Aryan ideas of purity gained more and more ground amongst this hybrid population and even amongst the purely aboriginal peoples. From thence arose two categories of scruples, the subdivisions of which were multiplied according to the varying degrees of impurity either of descent or occupation. While the ancient principles of family life were perpetuated, the grouping factors were diversified—that is to say, function, religion, vicinity, and so forth, side by side with the primitive principle of consanguinity, behind which they more or less conceal themselves. The groups grew and overlapped. Under the double influence of their own traditions and of the ideas which they borrowed from Aryan civilization, the aboriginal tribes themselves, in proportion as they renounced an isolated and savage life, accelerated the influx of new sections. Caste came into existence from that time onwards. We have seen how in its various degrees it was slowly substituted for the family government from which it is derived.

A political power might have brought these organisms together under a regular system, but no political constitution was evolved, even in conception. This cannot be regarded as surprising.

It would find no favour with the sacerdotal power, whose domination it would threaten, and sacerdotalism exercised a very strong and consistent influence, paralysing even the power of the military aristocracy. The configuration of the country does not constitute natural centres of concentration, for the boundaries are all vague. Pastoral life long maintained a spirit of strict tradition, and was untouched by any marked love of action. The number of the vanquished was great. Crushed rather than absorbed, they were slowly invaded by sacerdotal propaganda rather than subjugated by a sudden conquest. With some modifications this subdued population kept, especially where localized and isolated, much of its old organization. The mere fact of its presence in the country and the example of its extremely primitive institutions, which merged so easily into the somewhat crude organization of the immigrants, formed another obstacle to the foundation of a genuine political power. There was no vestige of a state.

Amid this confusion the sacerdotal class alone, in spite of its subdivisions, retained a strong corporate spirit and possessed a power which was both moral and highly efficacious. This it used to strengthen and extend its privileges, and also to establish under its supremacy some kind of order and cohesion. It generalized and codified

existing conditions into an ideal system which it strove to have sanctioned by law. This was the legal caste-system. In it was amalgamated the existing situation with the stubborn traditions of the past, in which class-hierarchy had laid the foundations of its power, now so greatly increased.

This system, sprung from a mixture of arbitrary pretensions and authentic facts, became a force in its turn. Not only was it carried by the Brahmans as a dogma into parts of the country where it was assimilated at a later date, but everywhere, thanks to the immense authority wielded by its patrons, it reacted through ideas upon practice. Idealism tended to be imposed as the strict rule of duty. But the distance between fact and theory was too great ever to admit of a complete fusion of the two.

What interests us is the path followed by the institution in its spontaneous growth. I need therefore go no farther.

The caste is, to my mind, the normal continuation of ancient Āryan institutions taking their form according to the variations of conditions and environment which they encountered in India. It would be as inexplicable without this traditional foundation as it would be unintelligible without the racial admixtures which have crossed in it and without the circumstances which have moulded it.

Let there be no misunderstanding. I do not pretend to maintain that the caste-system as we observe it to-day, with its infinite sections differing in nature and consistency, is limited to the development, logical and purely organic, of the primitive Āryan elements only. Groups of various origins and variable structure have at all times entered it and are still multiplying : clans of invaders who blaze the trail of successive conquests, aboriginal tribes tardily emerged from their wild isolation, casual subdivisions either of castes properly so called or of assimilated groups. Indeed, it is impossible to doubt that those mixtures which, aggravated by many permutations, give to the caste to-day so disconcerting and elusive a character appeared at an early date. Although they have become increasingly marked, they nevertheless began at the time when the system was in process of formation. I have already said, and I make a point of repeating, that if we condense a general conclusion into a summary formula there is a risk of appearing to exaggerate its principle ; whether it arise from a desire for precision or the charm of novelty, there is danger of falsifying a just conception by stretching it too far. I do not wish to be suspected of being carried away, for I am on my guard against that danger.

Whatever external influences they may have suffered, and whatever disturbances the chances

of history may have wrought, the Āryans of India have, in my opinion, drawn from their own sources the essential elements of the caste, such as they practised, conceived, and finally co-ordinated. The system under which India has lived is not a purely economic organization of trades nor a chaos of strange and hostile tribes and races, nor again a simple class-hierarchy, but a mingling of all these, united by the common inspiration which dominates the functioning of all the groups, and by the community of characteristic ideas and prejudices which govern their order of precedence. This is because the family-constitution, surviving through all evolutions, governing first the Āryans, then spreading with their influence to impose itself even on groups of independent origin, has been the pivot of a slow transformation.

I have been careful to remember that heterogeneous elements may have cut across it. Moreover, once complete in its essential traits, it goes without saying that it was subject, like all ageing systems in which tradition is no longer revived by contact with a living consciousness of its origins, to the influence of analogy. The principles which observers have thought to discover in it, and conclusions based on false premises, have both played their part in it. Although accidental or secondary, these modifications have not failed to produce an apparent confusion in the

facts. But I will not press the point ; if needs be, the sources can be found in the details which I have had occasion to indicate in passing.

Even confining ourselves to the period of formation, it would be satisfactory to be able to fix the dates. What I have said about literary tradition will explain why I have nothing precise to offer. Ancient institutions are only imbued with a new spirit by imperceptible degrees ; movements which may, according to circumstances, take place at different rates in various regions, only become visible when the earlier order has grown completely unrecognizable. They are obscure because they are slow ; we cannot attribute exact dates to them. At most we might flatter ourselves that we had determined the moment when the Brahmanic system, which theoretically governed the caste, received its final form. The claim would still be too ambitious. But we may take comfort from the fact that it would not leave us much better off if it is true that this system rather sums up the ideal of the dominant caste than reflects the true situation.

Even as regards the Veda, the value of the indications which it vouchsafes are anything but definite. We need to know whether it really exhausts the whole of contemporary facts, and whether it reproduces them faithfully and intact, a matter of which I do not feel that we are at all

sure. The one thing certain is that these indications display, still standing out in full relief, that class-hierarchy which later was resolved into the caste-system. It is, however, indubitable that already in the Vedic period causes were at work which by their combined and continuous action were to graft a new order on the old Āryan trunk.

The Āryans of India and those of the classical world started from the same origins. How different were the developments in the two cases !

In the beginning they were the same groups, governed by the same beliefs and usages. In Greece and Italy these little societies joined together and organized themselves into an ordered system. Each group preserved its complete autonomy in its own sphere of action, but the higher federation which constituted the city upheld common interests and co-ordinated common action. Chaos took shape under the touch of the Greeks ; isolated organisms were resolved into a wider unity, and as it was perfected, the new idea which was its latent soul, the political idea, began to take shape. Like the caste, the city sprang from the common primitive constitution. Moulded on the same religious rules and traditions, but inspired by new necessities, it evolved a new principle of organization. It showed itself capable

of expansion and of leaping the barriers which had supported but also confined its first steps. Later, it was to suffice in modified form for the needs of the most profound revolutions in life and government.

In India the caste continues the customs of antiquity; it even develops them in several respects along their logical lines; but it loses something of the impulse which had created the primitive groups, and does not renew its spirit. Diverse conceptions mingle with or replace the genealogical tie which bound the first societies. In thus modifying and becoming castes they find no regulating principle within themselves, but overlap, each isolated in its own jealous autonomy. The social order is immense, without defined limits or organic life—a confused mass of little independent societies reduced to a common level.

The classical language of India is distinguished from cognate languages by a striking peculiarity. The finite verb finds small place in the sentence; the thought is unfolded in long, compound phrases, often very ambiguously related. Instead of a solid syntactic construction in which the design is perceptible and the stresses stand out of themselves in clearly defined clauses, the sentence boasts no more than a loose structure in which the constituent parts of the thought, merely juxta-

posed, are lacking in relief. The religious beliefs of India are scarcely ever presented in positive dogmas. In the vague outlines of an imperfectly defined pantheism opposition and divergences rise for a moment only, then sink back into the shifting mass. Contradictions are quickly resolved in a conciliatory syncretism which weakens schisms, and all differences are cloaked by a convenient orthodoxy. Nowhere is there categorical doctrine, consistent and uncompromising. On the social plane an analogous phenomenon appears in the caste-system. Everywhere is the same spectacle of plastic impotence.

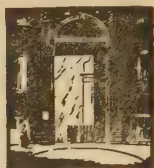
Whatever vigour it may have borrowed from external and historic circumstances, the caste is clearly the fruit of the Hindu mind. The social organization of India is to the structure of the antique cities what a Hindu poem is to a Greek tragedy. In practical life as well as in art the Hindu genius rarely shows itself capable of organization—that is to say, of measure and harmony. In the caste it has exhausted all its efforts in maintaining and strengthening a network of closed groups, without common action or mutual reaction, recognizing in the long run no other motive-power than the unchecked authority of a sacerdotal class which has constituted itself the people's sole director. Under the levelling rule of Brahmanism the castes move as the

episodes jostle one another haphazard in the vague unity of an epic narrative. It is enough that an artificial system theoretically masks their incoherence.

The destinies of caste are, rightly considered, an instructive chapter in the psychology of India.



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